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Confucian Thought and Contemporary Western Philosophy



Andrew Lambert

1 Introduction

Writing in the 1960s and mindful of its struggles in the twentieth century, the great China historian Joseph Levenson suggested that the Confucian tradition would not play a living role in Chinese society in the future, and instead belonged in the “museum” of human history (1968: 115, 110–125). Rumors of the tradition’s demise have proved exaggerated, however, and one reason is the interest in Confucian thought that has emerged in European and Anglophone philosophy (crudely, “Western”), especially since the last decades of the twentieth century.

Systematic interest in Chinese thought among twentieth-century Anglophone philosophers can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, and historians of Chinese philosophy educated in the West such as FENG Youlan (馮友蘭) and HU Shi (胡適). English-language editions of Feng’s *A History of Chinese Philosophy* 中國哲學是上下冊 (1983a, b) were particularly influential.¹ Feng harnessed the anti-religious rationalism of China’s reform movement, but used it to defend Confucian ideas rather than dismiss them. He also aligned Chinese thought with Western philosophy by aligning the long-standing interest in human nature, self-cultivation, and the nature of the cosmos with Western philosophical categories such as epistemology, logic, monism and pluralism, and universals and particulars.² Chinese thought

¹On Feng’s work, see Lomanov (1998: 323–341) and Lin (2014: 40–73). On HU Shi’s work, see Hu (2013: 209–216).

²Feng writes, “The activities of Confucius were similar in many ways to those of the Greek Sophists” and “The activities of Confucius, and his influence in Chinese history, have been similar to that of Socrates in West” (Feng 1983a: 48–49); *tian* 天 is glossed as “the natural universe” (Feng 1983b: 8).

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thereby acquired the form of philosophy and became worthy of the interest of Western-trained philosophers.

The burgeoning encounter between Anglophone or European philosophy and traditional Confucian thought has faced challenges, however. These include disagreement over how to approach the Confucian intellectual tradition, which includes questions about what the Masters' texts are (Denecke 2010) and whether the tradition has "philosophy." On the one hand, there is the demand to understand Confucian thought in its own time and place, seeking original meaning by prizing textual fidelity and sensitivity to historical and cultural milieu. This approach, however, can diverge from attempts to read traditional texts in direct dialogue with Western philosophy, often with the aim of extending or reinventing the Confucian tradition, and perhaps detaching it from earlier manifestations that were later deemed problematic (such as sexist or oppressive practices and norms). This intellectual-history-versus-philosophy split is reflected in translation methodologies, where origin-centric or literal translations contrast with creative interpretations that speak to the needs of the contemporary reader while denying the possibility of a single transcendental meaning (Gu 2014).

A closely-related question in Anglophone debate is whether or not the Confucian intellectual tradition has something that should be called 'philosophy.'³ There is no simple answer to this question, since much depends on what is meant by 'philosophy' (Defoort 2001; Struhl 2010). The question encompasses, for example, whether Chinese texts use explicit argument that systematically moves towards valid conclusions, whether philosophy should be understood more capaciously, reflecting a more general 'love of wisdom,' whether the Chinese tradition suggests a redefinition of the term, and how to assess philosophers who engage Chinese texts using 'philosophical' methods.

Instead of attempting a direct answer to this question, this chapter explores the evolution in philosophical methods and heuristics employed by Western thinkers in the past 50 or so years, which has often separated Confucian thought from its specific social and historical roots. This has involved bringing the Confucian tradition into dialogue with Western philosophy, articulating new forms of Confucian philosophy not explicit in traditional texts, developing critiques of Western modernity, contributing solutions to debates in Western philosophy, and seeking to reimagine Confucian thought for an East Asian modernity. Attention must also be paid, however, to those skeptical of the need or value of such philosophical theorizing.

Illustrating what Western philosophers have regarded as valuable in the Confucian tradition (or what was wrong with Western intellectual traditions and practices), as this present study aims to do, can partly justify taking the philosophical path rather than the path of intellectual history. Furthermore, by laying out how Western philosophers have engaged the Chinese tradition it is possible to indirectly shed light on what "Chinese philosophy" means, without becoming mired in definitional claims.

³See the chapter "Recent Developments in Confucianism in Mainland China" for the similar debate in China.

2 Confucianism and East Asian Development

One early form of interest in the Confucian tradition emerged from the question of the tradition's usefulness to modernity—with “modernity” understood as having Western characteristics: democratic, with institutionalized science and market-based economies. In early republican China, Western learning was often presented as an alternative to traditional Chinese values and practices, which were criticized as decadent and inimical to modernization.⁴

One form of this debate in European and Anglophone circles focused on economic development, and whether capitalism and Confucian values were compatible. Weber's famous study of China (1953 [1915]) had concluded that Chinese social structures did little to foster the growth of capitalism. This view cohered with the New Culture Movement within China, which blamed Confucian values for China's ills. In the 1960s, however, the relation between Confucian values and capitalism became contested, and Confucian values were used to make contradictory arguments.

Some Western scholars—exemplified by Levenson and John K. Fairbank—still considered Confucian values a hindrance to progress and economic success.⁵ Within a few decades, however, Confucian values were heralded as instrumental to the rapid development of East Asian economies in the post-war period.⁶ The notion of “Confucian Capitalism” emerged with the Asian tiger economies, and sociologist Peter Berger coined the term “East Asian Development Model” to describe the combination of free market economics and a commitment to state intervention prevalent in countries such as Japan.⁷ More generally, the extended family unit provided competitive advantages such as cheap labor and networks of loyal personal connections. Confucian capitalism thus offered new insight into how capitalism operated. This was a form of modernity that reaffirmed the worth of the Confucian tradition.⁸

It was not merely interest in alternative forms of capitalism that drove interest in Confucian thought, however. The Confucian tradition was also presented as a critique of capitalism *per se*. Weber had noted the negative effects of capitalism—the loss of personal meaning within an impersonal bureaucratic system dominated by the drive for efficiency and profit—and Confucian thought was increasingly regarded as an alternative value system.

⁴ See the collected essays in Hon and Stapleton (2017). See also Tan (2003: 1–16).

⁵ For Fairbank, China's failure to react to the emergence of Western economic and military power lay in China's longstanding view of itself as “central, superior and self-sufficient” (quoted in van Dongen 2017: 29). On how late Qing-era China's contact with the West was conditioned by traditional notions of Chinese cultural superiority, see Teng and Fairbank (1954: 2–5, 17–19).

⁶ For early formulations of such a view, see Morishima (1978) and Ezra Vogel (1979).

⁷ See Berger and Hsiao (1988: 3–11).

⁸ Tu (1996). On how the “modernization” of Confucian thought, perhaps unwittingly, amounted to a discourse that has reinforced capitalism, see Dirlik (1995: 229–273).

This approach drew on Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality, integral to capitalism, and value rationality.⁹ Value rationality referred to "belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success" (Weber 1978: 25). This meant acting for ideals independently of their utility. Some Confucian scholars used this distinction to develop an account of the Confucian tradition that distinguished it from the conservative tradition attacked by May Fourth reformers. Cultural conservatives within China had affirmed social norms that were historically- and culturally-rooted and constituted 'orthodox' state Confucianism. On this view, the Confucian tradition was inseparable from specific historical and social circumstances. Chinese Communist Party co-founder CHEN Duxiu (陳獨秀), for example, criticized Confucianism as the upholding of institutionally-enshrined hierarchical relations. Familial bonds structured the political sphere, such that, according to Chen, "advocating respect for Kongzi must necessarily lead to an emperor ascending the throne" (quoted in van Dongen 2017: 26).

In Western academia, however, scholars such as Tu Wei-ming (杜維明) distinguished between historically-situated traditions, and a Confucian moral vision rooted in personal cultivation.¹⁰ The latter approach was rooted in a theory of the self and a broader cosmological framework, which transcended particular social institutions or economic systems. Consequently, debate shifted from social norms and practices to abstract and philosophical ideas such as *ren* (仁 humaneness), *yi* (義 rightness), *li* (禮 ritual) and human nature (性), and Tu developed the more abstract notion of a "fiduciary community" (Tu 1989: 39–66). This made possible a philosophical defense of Confucian practice grounded in a self that was sculpted around Confucian values and embedded in a grander cosmological vision. Unlike the practices of state Confucianism in China, such values were ahistorical.¹¹

This new approach offered a new normative foundation for the Confucian way: social obligations and entrenched social practice were now subservient to more abstract ideals that were to be found in the heart-mind of the ordinary person. This created a reflective space beyond social and historical realities, and made possible a Confucian critique of existing social institutions. Confucian values were thus detached from the more oppressive or objectionable elements of China's past, and could provide an intellectual foundation for a modernized Confucian culture.¹²

⁹Weber (1978: 24–25). For a full discussion of how Confucian scholars such as Tu Wei-ming and CHEN Lai used Weber's work to rehabilitate Confucian thought, see van Dongen (2017: 19–43).

¹⁰Within China, Chen (2009), who studied with Tu at Harvard, has explored similar themes.

¹¹See Tu (1984: 90) on the distinction between political Confucianism and Confucianism as a way of life.

¹²Recently, rather than explore a Confucian version of capitalist social and economic order, some have explored the prospects for "Confucian Marxism" (Chen Weigang 陳維綱 2014). This asks whether a Chinese Marxist repurposing of the Confucian tradition can generate a conception of the public realm, in which the laboring masses were central to accounts of social justice (Chen 2014: 194).

Furthermore, this understanding of Confucian values suggested an alternative to a Western liberal capitalist modernity. It offered a standpoint from which to confront the spread of instrumental rationality, technical control of society, and understanding of human interaction in terms of equality within market-orientated relations. Tu expressed concern that this “Enlightenment mentality” approach to modernity had become the preferred outcome “for the future of the human community” (Tu 2014: 145). The idea of cultivating an inner nature is not novel, and extends the philosophy of Mengzi and Song-Ming Neo-Confucian thought.¹³ The approach of thinkers such as Tu Wei-ming is distinguished, however, by what Tu terms “Cultural China” (Tu 1991). This is the idea that Confucian philosophy is not limited to a single historical tradition, but can extend beyond the Sinitic world as a form of “inclusive humanism” or “religiousness.”¹⁴

One example of transposing a Confucian way of life to cultures beyond East Asia is Boston Confucianism, with which Tu was associated. This approach treated the Confucian way as a participant in intercultural dialogue and global debate, offering a distinct humanistic perspective. Robert Neville, a representative Boston Confucian notes, “philosophically I think with Confucianism, in relation to my own mainly Western culture and in relation to the various problems of world cultures” (Neville 2010: 147). One concern of the school was recognition of the relevance of Confucian ritual theory for the modern world. Xunzi’s theorizing about ritual, for example, could be understood as a way of layering the world with a system of social meaning to guide human action, and this could be compared with the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce (Neville 2008: 153–155).

3 Analytical Philosophy and Conceptual Analysis: Herbert Fingarette

A focus on ritual brings forth another way in which philosophers in the West have helped to reinvigorate Confucian thought. This is the use of analytical philosophy to generate new readings of canonical texts and new glosses of key terms. By drawing on work in different disciplines of philosophy, such as ethics and the philosophy of language, and applying techniques such as conceptual analysis, Western trained analytical philosophers reimagined the Confucian vision. The vision or visions that have emerged are sometimes at odds with traditional interpretations, and can show little awareness of classical texts’ broader historical and literary contexts. Nevertheless, these thought-provoking readings facilitated discussion of Confucian

¹³In his culture-transcending philosophy, Tu was building on the ideas of Chinese scholars earlier in the century, beginning with XIONG Shili (熊十力) (2015), who revived the Lu-Wang Neo-Confucian emphasis on the cultivation of mind and the self. Xiong’s approach influenced later New Confucians, including MOU Zongsan (牟宗三) and XU Fuguan (徐復觀).

¹⁴See also the chapter “Tu Weiming: The Global Confucian”.

ideas in Western universities, partly due to the use familiar methodologies and terminology.

I.E Richards (1932) is an early example of this approach, but a more influential early work is Herbert Fingarette's book *Confucius— The Secular as Sacred*. Fingarette reimagined the figure of Kongzi, transforming him from “a prosaic and parochial moralizer” into a thinker with “profound insight” (Fingarette 1972: vii), and so liberated the *Analects* from more traditional or conservative understandings.

He did this by focusing on a topic neglected by Western philosophers: ritual (*li*). Kongzi's genius lay in recognizing the extent to which human conduct is structured by ritual, broadly construed as “the entire body of the mores, or more precisely...the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society” (1972: 7). Mastery of ritualized customs, norms and conventions was the basis for a person's effectiveness or potency (*de* 德) in the social world, and brought with it a “magical” power to induce the appropriate response in others. At its apex, ritual provided a vision of the good society as an extended “sacred ceremony,” participation in which provided the greatest human fulfillment. Accordingly, Fingarette located key Confucian terms such as *ren* (“humanity at its best”) within this paradigm of ritualistic communal being.

Fingarette's work is significant for its use of contemporary analytical philosophy to develop this account. He drew on work in the philosophy of language and, in particular, J.L. Austin's account of speech acts (1972: 11–14). Through Austin, Fingarette demonstrated the importance of social context for effective action in the *Analects*, and how some speech acts should be understood not in terms of their literal or semantic meaning but for what they brought about in certain contexts as performative utterances. In the right context, the ritual word was the critical act. Understood in this way, the *Analects* was not simply a humanistic text that emphasized personal cultivation (though this was important); it also revealed how social structure makes certain actions possible, and how the skilled use of social norms and practices can bring about desired effects. Words or gestures deployed appropriately compel assent by virtue of implicit conventional power imbedded within them.

Fingarette highlights how contemporary analytical philosophy can enrich understanding of classical Confucian ideas. For example, Fingarette's account provided an explanation of spontaneity or effortless action (*wuwei* 無為, *Analects* 15.5) as the skillful command of customs and conventions. Such command was more crucial to practical outcomes than typically acknowledged by theories of action that focused narrowly on rational deliberation or inner attitudes or mental states.¹⁵ Consequently, where once Confucian rituals were viewed with suspicion, as entrenching traditional authority or inequality, they now became constitutive of the good life.

Fingarette's analysis of human dignity and ritual suggested another contribution of Confucian thought to Western philosophy: a novel account of human nature and

¹⁵ On the importance of *wuwei* to classical Chinese thought in general see Edward Slingerland (2000, 2007).

flourishing (1972: 63).¹⁶ For Confucians, human participation in sacred secular ceremony, as ceremonial beings, was the fullest expression of human nature and human dignity: “Man is transformed by participation with others in ceremony which is communal [...] Ceremony is justified when we see how it transforms the barbarian into what we know as man at his best...his best life is a life of holy ceremony rather than of appetite and mere animal existence” (1972: 77). Such human nature can be compared with other accounts of the distinctively human in the classical Western corpus—such as possession of a soul, as labor and productive power, or as human dignity rooted in a rational autonomy. Thus, while scholars such as Tu Wei-ming offer a critique of, and alternative to, Western modernity, figures such as Fingarette showed how classical Confucianism could be read in direct dialogue with Anglophone philosophy.

Fingarette’s rehabilitation of Kongzi stimulated various critical responses. His insistence, for example, that the *Analects* contains no meaningful discussion of psychological states (1972: *iv* and *passim*) was perhaps a product of the behaviorism popular at that time—and contrasts with the recent studies of Confucian shame, as well as the view that “concerned consciousness” (憂患意識 *youhuan yishi*) is a distinguishing feature of the Confucian sensibility (Xu 2005). Fingarette also claimed that the Confucian way (*dao*), at least in the *Analects*, lacked the language of “choice or responsibility” (18), and was, in Fingarette’s words, “a way without a crossroads.” This raised the question of whether the Confucian vision—of human society modeled on sacred ceremony—gave sufficient attention to practical deliberation and public reason in the evaluation of social practice. Chad Hansen, in his account of the Warring States schools, notes that “Confucius did not encourage debating as a method, Confucius did not view himself as participating in or resolving a debate between schools” (Hansen 1992: 59).¹⁷ This perceived lack of interest in choice, justification and rational judgment, alongside the supposedly diminished status of the individual in classical Confucian thought, raised doubts about what the *Analects* could offer to contemporary philosophy, insofar as the latter was concerned with individual agency, rational choice and moral responsibility.

¹⁶Also, Fingarette writes, “Confucius may be taken to imply that the individual human being, too, has ultimate dignity, sacred dignity by virtue of his role in rite, in ceremony, in li (ritual practice).” (Fingarette 1972: 75).

¹⁷Hansen writes of the *Analects*’ sheep-stealing passage (13.18) that, in his prescriptions “Confucius, however, does not raise the debater’s metaquestion of justification.... Indeed, he seems to have no cognizance of the metaquestion at all” (Hansen 1992: 82); and that, “He does not appear to have taught his disciples a discipline of arguing for a position. His conception of careful thought is more like taking good aim than it is like proceeding from premise to conclusion.” (Hansen 1992: 83)

4 Cultural Assumptions, Guiding Narratives and Bridging Concepts

This concern shaped the work of another scholarly duo prominent in the development of Anglophone Confucian thought—Roger Ames and David Hall. They were sympathetic to Fingarette’s ideas (Hall and Ames 1984: 19), but denied that the historical Kongzi was insensitive to the reform of tradition and individual discretion. Even if deliberative choice and reasoned debate were not central concerns in the *Analects*, good judgment and individual experience were, they argued, central to the personal cultivation and influence exhibited by the exemplary or consummate person (*junzi*).

Fingarette, they argued, had overlooked a key theme of the *Analects*—that indicated by the term *yi* (義).

Sometimes rendered as justice, morality or duty, Hall and Ames understood *yi* as appropriateness. It indicated the point at which accumulated tradition and personal judgment met. One who had the requisite education, cultural awareness, ability and charisma was not a subject determined by traditional norms or limited to the manipulation of social convention. Rather, the *junzi* was able to make appropriate changes to existing traditions, in ways consistent with the past but appropriate to present needs. This was the site of revision and cultural renewal that could save the Confucians from dogmatism and authoritarianism, and retain a prominent role for the individual. It also distinguished the classical Confucian vision from later institutional “Confucianism” that became ossified and eventually collapsed under the challenges of Western modernity. How such judgment functions is discussed below.

Hall and Ames were motivated by another concern, which was crucial to the reception of Confucian thought among Anglophone audiences. This is the extraction of texts from inappropriate cultural assumptions and interpretative frameworks prominent in earlier translations and scholarship.¹⁸ Infelicitous use of the Western philosophical canon, including the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, and Christian cosmology, had distorted earlier interpretations and translations.¹⁹

In response, Hall and Ames articulated a general interpretive framework for classical Confucian thought, one that made clearer its distinctive vision of human life and society (Hall and Ames 1987, 1995, 1998). They began by identifying a set of “uncommon assumptions” implicit in classical Confucian texts (1987: 10–25). These included the rejection of common dualisms found in the Western canon

¹⁸ Chinese scholars shared these concerns, which are seen in the famous New Confucian document “A Manifesto on the Reappraisal of Chinese Culture” 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言: 我們對中國學術研究及中國文化與世界文化前途之共同認 (Chang et al. 1987). On some problems with translating Chinese texts, see Gu (2014).

¹⁹ Hall and Ames write, “The primary defect of the majority of Confucius’ interpreters – those writing from within the Anglo-European tradition as well as those on the Chinese side who appeal to Western philosophic categories – has been the failure to search out and articulate those distinctive presuppositions which have dominated the Chinese tradition.” (1987: 11) (See also the chapter “Contemporary Confucianism and Ethical Theory”).

(mind-body, material-immaterial, good-evil, etc.), in favor of the interdependent polarities that characterize classical Chinese metaphysics and typified by the correlative yin-yang pairing. Furthermore, the notion of history as driven by great individual figures was replaced by the idea of a tradition that gradually evolves, integrating change into existing practices and understandings.

Most famously, Hall and Ames denied that a certain kind of transcendence, important in Western metaphysics and cosmology, is relevant to understanding pre-Qin China. This transcendence is defined as: “a principle, A, is transcendent with respect to that, B, which it serves as principle if the meaning or import of B cannot be fully analyzed and explained without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true.” (Hall and Ames 1987: 13)

Hall and Ames claim this form of transcendence is prominent in much of Western philosophy—in Christian cosmology, Plato’s theory of forms, Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, reductive materialist accounts of realities that seek the basic explanatory units or principles of existence, and even in existentialism in which authentic individuals supposedly create unprecedented rules for living. The understanding of sensible entities or events involves grasping some kind of underlying or pre-existing principle or order, whose source might be the mind of God, or the immutable laws of nature, or the categorical imperative that governs the truly rational mind and so forth. In contrast, classical Chinese thought makes little use of such transcendence. Hall and Ames’ pragmatism seeks to express the worldview intimated in the *Book of Changes* 易經, in which change is more fundamental than stasis, substance, or essential nature. In the early Chinese world, principles and norms are understood to emerge from the interaction of things and people rather than existing prior to them.

These “uncommon assumptions,” especially the denial of transcendence, are instrumental to extracting the texts from unduly Westernized or Christian readings. This is seen in disputes over the meaning of *tian* (天 heaven or cosmos) in classical Confucian thought. For some translators, such as James Legge, *tian* was “Heaven,” sometimes explicitly understood as an anthropomorphic deity, with similarities to the Abrahamic God.²⁰ Against this, Hall and Ames argued that *tian* is not a transcendental force controlling the universe, but is “a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own accord” (1987: 207). They offer a “focus-field” model to articulate this organic understanding of *tian* (1987: 237–241, 1998: 219–252). In this model, the interconnected whole or “field” was *tian*, broadly understood to include historical, cultural and physical aspects, while *tian* and every particular or “focus” that constitutes *tian* are interdependent and mutually determining.²¹ Within the field of *tian* any single focus (or person) was both determined by

²⁰E.g., Legge (1881: 42). Benjamin Schwartz (1985: 50–51) relies on Legge’s translations in his overview of Shang and Zhou history. For a defense of *tian* as a transcendent, personal, and moral deity, see Kelly James Clark (2005, 2009).

²¹Hall and Ames recognize that *tian* in classical China sometimes indicates an anthropomorphic deity (1987: 206), including ancestors who have passed into a spiritual realm and exert influence on the living. Such deities are not transcendent, however: they do not determine the world according to transcendental and fixed principles or orders.

the whole and also exerted influence on it. The Confucian *junzi*, as a focal point within a larger surrounding whole, could embody and partly determine that whole (such as his or her excellence, *de*). This cohered with the classical Confucian idea of a triumvirate of *tian-ren-di* 天 人 地, and of *tian ren he yi* (the unity of *tian* and the human 天人合一), wherein *tian*, humans (*ren*) and the earth (*di*) are co-creators of reality in the broadest sense—historically, culturally and even physically.²² *Tian* was to be understood on its own terms, and not by analogy to a creator-deity, reductive naturalism or other Western cosmological frameworks.

Hall and Ames did not, however, seek the complete separation of Western philosophy and Chinese thought. They drew on interpretive frameworks present in Western thought, though these were peripheral rather than orthodox. Their process worldview approach could be traced back to Heraclitus, but was expressed more systematically in Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and Deweyan pragmatism. Although Confucian texts did not mirror their vocabulary, these frameworks provided pragmatic “bridging concepts” for reading classical Confucian and Daoist texts.

This processual and pragmatic framework enabled Hall and Ames to address the paucity of Fingarette's account of rational debate and individual judgment in the *Analects*. They highlighted an alternative model of decision-making and order: “aesthetic order.” Such order contrasted with logical order derived from transcendent or first principles and established through rational discourse; and it rendered the Confucian *junzi* reasonable even though not explicitly concerned with rational debate.

Hall and Ames' account belongs to a broader lineage that understands the Chinese tradition as an aesthetic tradition.²³ Their rendering of “aesthetic” was distinguished, however, by its use of Whitehead's notion of an aesthetic order.²⁴ “Aesthetic” names “the sort of order comprised by particulars construed precisely in terms of their particularity” (Hall and Ames 1987: 351, n. 3).²⁵ Aesthetic order was the optimal arrangement of a set of particulars, distinguished by the effect produced. At its simplest, such order can be understood by analogy with the arts, such as painting. Constitutive elements, such as line, form and color are brought together to create an aesthetically pleasing effect. The same order can be applied in more practical or everyday affairs, including the creation of a social order, where a multiplicity of incommensurable social phenomena cannot be captured by a few reductive ordering rules or principles. Instead, each element of social life is to be optimally arranged, with attainment marked by a judgment based on a sense of fit or appropriateness. Ames writes, “Harmonious order is an aesthetic achievement made possible through

²² On religious concepts in early China and their evolution, see the editors' introduction and essays by Robert Eno and Martin Kern in Lagerwey and Kalinowski (2008).

²³ This lineage includes CAI Yuanpei 蔡元培; see his famous essay “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education” 以美育代宗教 in Denton (1996: 182–189). See also Xu (1966).

²⁴ See, e.g., Whitehead and Axiar (1996: 105).

²⁵ Note also: “Aesthetic order is achieved by the creation of novel patterns,” (Hall and Ames 1987: 16) without “the imposition of antecedently existing patterns upon events” (1987: 105).

ars contextualis, ‘the art of contextualizing,’ and hence is most appropriately expressible in an aesthetic language of elegance, complexity, intensity, balance, disclosure, efficacy, and so on” (Ames 2010: 74).

Exemplary persons or *junzi* excel at such judgments. After a long process of personal cultivation, they understand their traditions and ritual norms, have practical interpersonal skills to effect appropriate reform and, like Kongzi at age 70, can give free rein to their heart-mind without overstepping the mark. In practical terms, this ideal arrangement of particulars is seen in the integration of different social roles, the lack of social conflict and in the absorption of new ideas or events into existing tradition. With such accomplished people serving as models around which others cohere and find order, the Confucian social world is conservative yet reasonable and able to accommodate change. This account of practical judgment and social order offers an alternative to those derived from rational public debate and normative justification based on transcendental or immutable principles (or rights).

Hall and Ames interpretive framework aroused much critical discussion.²⁶ Some have denied that classical Chinese thought was “aesthetic,” claiming it relies more on metaphysical speculation and observation of systematic phenomena (Cheng 1999: 191). The identification of uncommon assumptions and a Chinese worldview also raises concerns about an essentializing East-West dichotomy, with the West characterized by transcendence and China by immanence (Slingerland 2018: 2). Others questioned whether this processual holistic interpretation had conflated translation and interpretation, veering too far towards interpretation while purportedly offering translation; this raised questions about whether key concepts and the logical relations in the original are preserved in the translation (Graham 1991: 288).

Some Chinese scholars have challenged Hall and Ames’ denial of transcendence.²⁷ New Confucians thinkers, in particular, often identified transcendence in classical Confucian thought. For Mou Zongsan (牟宗三), transcendence and immanence were both present in classical Confucian thought and not in opposition (Mou 1987, 2003). LEE Ming-huei (LI Minghui 李明輝 2001: 131–135), building on Mou’s approach, criticizes Hall and Ames for focusing narrowly on a dualistic metaphysical picture that fails to capture the transcendence in classical Chinese thought. On this account, transcendence and immanence expressed a tension between the actual and the ideal—the finite sensible world and the infinite realm of the moral subject. Transcendence referred to the moral imperatives originating from *tian* and constituting the “command of heaven” (*tianming*天命), and could be known by the moral subject through Kantian intellectual intuition. As with mathematical truths, this need not involve perceptual experience or empirical knowledge, though Mou also emphasises the creative or authorial aspect of such intuition. Such

²⁶A summary of important criticisms of the Hall and Ames approach is provided in Slingerland (2018: 22–64). For a more sympathetic assessment see Behuniak Jr (2018).

²⁷For a book-length study of transcendence and immanence, see Brown and Franke (2016); Franke (2016: 35–65) summarizes responses to Hall and Ames’ denial of transcendence in classical Chinese thought.

transcendence did not therefore presume metaphysical dualism, or knowledge of an independent or unchanging realm that grounded principled distinctions.

In debates about transcendence in classical Chinese thought, much depends on how “transcendence” is understood. Hall and Ames’ goal was to articulate an order that is contingent, such that the historically-rooted human way is always provisional (even if often stable), and is not determined by timeless reality or transcendental sources of knowledge. Order emerges from the multiple particulars making up the whole, i.e., the cumulative achievements of people embedded with historical tradition, social custom and the natural world. Consequently, the identification of a transcendental realm that guides action via intellectual intuition would seem to qualify as transcendence according to Hall’s and Ames’ particular definition.²⁸ What is clear, however, is that both approaches to judgment—intellectual intuition or judgments of appropriateness—face a problem of justification; namely, how they can be translated into public explanations and reasons that can support the authority claimed for such judgments.

Setting aside the thorny issue of transcendence, others objected that the historical Kongzi was less of an innovator than the figure depicted in Hall and Ames’ account. On conservative readings, the *Analects* treats the rites and norms of the Zhou dynasty as authoritative, as expressing essential cosmic or human realities, and so needing or permitting only limited change. On a similar theme, Philip Ivanhoe argued that Confucian traditionalism permitted flexibility in the application of received norms but not their overturning. He writes, “Confucius... never innovates. What he does do is appropriate and propagate traditional patterns of behavior and apply them to solve the challenges of his day. He is flexible and creative in his application of traditional norms, but he never challenges these norms themselves.” (Ivanhoe 1991: 244) More recently, however, several scholars have attributed to the early Confucians a more flexible approach to ritual norms, with greater scope for contextual judgments (Van Norden 2007; Wong 2009).

Another scholar who identified a unifying framework in the pre-Qin texts, but who rejected the idea of Kongzi as a pragmatic innovator, was Chad Hansen (1992). For Hansen, the historical Kongzi was not a discerning judge, and the original Confucian school was not particularly rational: it “does not come out on top philosophically” (Hansen 1992: 3). The ascendancy of Confucian ideas in the Chinese tradition was due to socio-political factors rather than philosophical worth, since they reinforced the imperial ideology from the Han onwards.

Hansen’s historicist theory of the classical schools centered on their increasingly sophisticated treatment of language and discourse. In Confucian texts, language functions as a prescriptive discourse (*a dao*) that seeks to guide practical conduct; it does not aim for truth-functional descriptions of an external reality. Each school

²⁸Hall and Ames denial of transcendence is not solely aimed at metaphysical dualism; Hall and Ames also deny that individuals can, by themselves, be the source of transcendental principles for determining action (Hall and Ames 1987: 14). Rather than serving as a direct refutation, the force of Lee’s criticism is bound up with the larger interpretive question of whether Kantian categories, and the appeal to intellectual intuition, make better sense of the *Analects* than aesthetic order.

offered their own *dao* or guiding discourse, with later schools responding to earlier views and developing successively more evolved understandings of how language generates social order. The most sophisticated linguistic or logical analysis was developed in the later Mohist canon.

As with any attempt to organize the classical schools around a single unifying explanation, Hansen's theory has been disputed.²⁹ One doubt is whether language was the primary means by which the Confucians created social order. Other ways of securing socialization and social harmony seem equally prominent in classical Confucian texts—such as embodied ritual participation, the use of music and even the natural emergence of emotions through personal attachment.³⁰

5 Beyond Guiding Frameworks: Anti-Theory and Starting from Otherness

The critical reaction to interpretive philosophical frameworks yielded an alternative methodological approach to the texts. This was an “anti-philosophical way of reading Chinese thought” (Møllgaard 2005: 321). Eske Møllgaard, for example, laments “the philosophical turn in the study of Chinese thought” (Møllgaard 2005: 322). Hansen's and Hall and Ames' use of analytic philosophy or American pragmatism, respectively, distorts the texts, and “the notion of philosophy that is introduced into the study of Chinese thought is too narrow to do justice to the wide range of styles and concerns of Chinese thinkers” (2005, 321). Wiebke Denecke (2010) also deconstructs attempts to parse the pre-Qin Masters' texts using the categories of modern Euro-American philosophy, and explores the historical reasons why Chinese thought was presented as philosophy, going back to Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci (Denecke 2010: 4–7).

Møllgaard argues that reliance on theory inhibits patient and careful reading: meaning is generated by jumping to the level of abstract theory, with idiosyncratic elements or illuminating contradictions overlooked in favor of data consistent with the overarching theory. A theoretically unencumbered mode of reading is needed, in which understanding of an initially strange text is achieved slowly and with effort. Instead of judging a thinker utilitarian, pragmatist, relativist or skeptic, or that two texts present incommensurable conceptual schemes, the reader—to use a Gadamerian term—should instead “tarry” with the prose poems, fables, aphorisms and striking images of a text (Møllgaard 2005: 335). Through such mindful encounters, piecemeal and organic connections between parts of the text are made, and a more holistic understanding emerges.

²⁹Another account of the pre-Qin thought that relies on a single unifying explanatory structure—*wuwei* 無為 or effortless action—is Slingerland (2007). Fraser (2007) offers a critical assessment of this account.

³⁰See Ames (1994) for a critical review of Hansen's claims.

This approach is partly motivated by concern about making the classical texts appear philosophical in a contemporary Anglophone sense—concerned with structured argument, the law of non-contradiction and so on—and that this obscures distinctive accounts of thinking and feeling found in the texts. Reading the classical texts as sources of answers to the problems of Western thinkers thus inhibits appreciation of the texts' own viewpoints. Furthermore, in so far as the texts are composites compiled over time and contain the different voices of schools evolving over time, so higher-level unification might be unrealistic.

At the same time, however, whether all generalizations and Gadamerian prejudice can or should be avoided is unclear (Gadamer et al. 2004: 273). Arguably, all readings of such alien texts rely on some interpretative framework and, consequently, it is better to make guiding assumptions explicit. Defenders of bridging concepts and interpretative frameworks would argue their generalizations are not imposed on the text but rather emerge after several years of tarrying with it.³¹

Perhaps, in summary, the use of bridging concepts and guiding interpretive frameworks constitutes an important stage in the evolution of Western scholars' encounters with the Confucian intellectual tradition. Much like later feminists owe much to earlier feminist movements, strengthening the feminist cause overall without necessarily replicating or endorsing those earlier ideas or positions, so these interpretive frameworks were instrumental in securing greater cultural and intellectual capital for these texts—even if they were later subject to increased scrutiny and challenge.

One alternative to potentially inappropriate macro-level interpretive frameworks is to focus more narrowly, on specific concepts or terms characteristic of classical Chinese thought. The works of Francois Jullien illustrates this approach, offering book-length studies of important terms such as *shi* (勢 the propensity of things) (Jullien 1999a, b), *yangsheng* (養生 “to feed one’s life”) (Jullien 2007), or the use of indirect methods or indirect speech to achieve desirable effects (Jullien 2000). Jullien does still attempt comparison, but this begins from a study of a single idea, not a set of axioms. Jullien insists he is not “extrapolating some overall unity to a body of thought” (2007: 9). Jullien’s aim is to examine classical Chinese discourse, because it developed independently of Greek or classical Western learning, to better understand the assumptions and foundations of European philosophy (Jullien 1999a). Ideally, such investigations can stimulate a reconsideration of European and Anglophone thought. For example, appreciating the role of circumstance and context in practical success prompts reflection on beliefs about individual agency and moral responsibility (1999b), while the implications of ‘nourishing life’ (*yangsheng*) shed light on the dualistic European categories of body and soul (2007).

Jullien, too, has been criticized for exoticizing China (Slingerland 2018): exaggerating the effects of syntactical and etymological differences in language, and producing an imaginary place whose primary function is as a counterpoint for

³¹ See also Ames' (2005) response to Møllgaard.

thinking about the Greek-Roman or Judeo-Christian traditions.³² In response, Jullien denies that he replicates the familiar orientalist binaries of “East” and “West” by highlighting differences; rather, he argues that precisely because China exists outside the conceptual frameworks familiar in Western traditions so such direct comparisons and lists of binary opposites are impossible. Jullien notes, “One must not confuse ‘elsewhere’ with ‘difference’: China is *elsewhere*, beyond the European sphere — it is not more different from Europe than it is similar to it” (Jullien 2004: 12). For Jullien, sincere investigation of the initially strange problematizes concepts and values previously unreflectively accepted; and this in turn can generate new understandings of the Chinese texts and ideas.

Regardless of how one judges Jullien’s work as a whole, one noteworthy feature has been the muted interest in familiar terms such as humaneness (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*) and *dao*. Jullien explores ideas less familiar to Western readers, and so invites new perspectives on the nature of beauty (2014), time (2011), and the value of blandness in aesthetic experience (2004).

6 Contemporary Research: Confucian Thought in Dialogue with Western Theory

The last few decades have seen increasing diversity in philosophical approaches to Confucian thought. Approaches rooted in European and Anglophone thought have generated new ways of reading the texts, and also enriched debates in Western philosophy or even created new ones. Such boundary-crossing work has arisen across philosophical disciplines, including epistemology (Allen 2015), the philosophy of language (Geaney 2018), metaphysics (Liu 2017), and aesthetics (Shusterman 2009). Western scholars have also explored feminist perspectives consistent with the Confucian tradition, thus accommodating gender in a way that is absent from classical texts (Rosenlee 2012; Foust and Tan 2016).

One area where Anglophone theory has been actively developed to categorize and open Confucian texts to wider cross-cultural engagement is ethics.³³ Particularly prominent have been readings of classical Confucian thought structured around Western ethical theories such as (Kantian) deontology, consequentialism, care ethics and virtue ethics. The most sustained dialogue has focus on an ethics of virtue.³⁴ This has seen comparative studies of Chinese and Greek thinkers (Sim 2007; Yu 2009), questions about whether ‘virtue ethics’ is an appropriate way to conceptualize that tradition (Lee 2017), and attempts to reconstruct a Confucian virtue ethics.

³²ZHANG Longxi 張隆溪 (1998) has expressed doubts about such comparative study of China. On Jullien, specifically see Zhang (1999).

³³See also the chapter “Contemporary Confucianism and Ethical Theory”.

³⁴For a general discussion on the prospects for Confucian virtue ethics, see Hutton (2015) and Tiwald (2010).

Van Norden (2007, 2013) argues that classical Confucian thought yields a naturalistic virtue ethics, since it has a conception of human flourishing and recognizes virtues that are instrumental to that goal. The Confucian picture of the good life is distinctive, however. Ritual is central, since it structures human emotions and inculcates appropriate attitudes to social life, as are aesthetic appreciation and a heightened concern for the special bonds of kinship and family (Van Norden 2007: 102–117). Integral to this vision of living well is thus a distinctive set of virtues, which include “humaneness [*ren*], wisdom [*智zhi*], devotion [*忠zhong*], and faithfulness [*信xin*]” (2007: 125).

A virtue ethics rooted in the *Analects* thus differs from canonical Western analogues, Aristotle’s contemplative eudaimonia. Intellectual virtues, including sustained reflective deliberation, play only a minor role in the *Analects*.³⁵ Emphasis on the particularistic bonds of family life also distinguishes Confucian well-being. Thus, studying Confucian thought as an ethics of virtue can, as with Fingarette’s account, help generate conceptions of flourishing beyond those found in the Western canon.³⁶

The equation of Confucian ethics with virtue ethics has faced various responses. One is defenses of alternative conceptions of Confucian ethics, such as Mencian consequentialism (Im 2011) and Confucian care ethics (Li Chenyang 李晨陽 1994). These approaches also face challenges, however (Tiwald 2010: 60, Star 2002; Lambert 2016). More directly, LEE Ming-huei (2017) argues that virtue is not a useful explanatory category in Confucian thought, partly due to the vagueness and ambiguity of the notion. Lee argues that teleology (consequentialism) and deontology are the only possible grounds of normative judgment, logically excluding “a third type of ethics” (2017: 51), and that Confucian ethics is best understood as a species of deontological ethics. In this, he echoes recent work in Kantian ethics on the importance of virtue to compliance with the moral law; virtue is important but the normative ground of moral action remains universalizing reason (Johnson and Cureton 2018; Baron 2011). Virtues, particularly in so far as they are relativized to a tradition, as in Van Norden’s study, may be unable to resolve moral disagreement when it arises between different communities or traditions, and conflict resolution is arguably one of the purposes of moral theory. Much depends here on whether such universal accord or principle is necessary for a viable ethics, and whether moral relativism is pernicious or benign (Wong 2009).

Another objection to Confucian virtue ethics derives from the characterization of Confucian ethics in terms of generic human qualities or traits. The relationships constituting the family life of Confucians are, on this view, better understood in terms of an ethic of roles. In extremis, this is a quasi-metaphysical view that human beings are constituted entirely by their roles (Rosemont and Ames 2009). More

³⁵Van Norden follows Waley in suggesting that *si* (思, attention) indicates not systematic thinking but thought deriving from recent concrete observations (2007: 129).

³⁶Confucian virtue ethics is being developed in various ways, which includes reconceptualizing “virtue.” Ivanhoe (2013), for example, suggests that, in the *Mengzi*, individual virtues can be conceived of as contributions to the good of larger social units.

subtly, Ames (2011) argues that the lived experience of playing a role, such as a father, incrementally builds into a pattern of action appropriate to that role. While generalized norms governing a particular social station matter, a role develops beyond this, coming to include a highly personalized interpretation of how to be a good father. Focusing on virtues as generic excellences obscures such personalization of a role and the many idiosyncratic norms, insights and emotions that arise through personal experience and then guide action within that role.

Whether such an account is best described as a “role” and whether classical Confucian accounts of family life can accommodate such particularistic understandings is debatable. Notably, however, defenders of Confucian virtue ethics also emphasize particularistic decision-making in the *Analects* (Van Norden 2007: 99). Another challenge to the role ethics approach, and particularly its claims to be a *sui generis* moral theory, is that it might be unnecessary (Angle 2018). Undoubtedly, Confucian ethics should not be reductively co-opted by existing Western theory; however, Angle argues, the emergence of more nuanced understandings of Confucian thought mean that a strong emphasis on incommensurability is no longer needed to ensure open-minded engagement with Confucian thought. Furthermore, advances in virtue ethical theory offer the best way to articulate the Confucian ethical vision. Nevertheless, role ethics is developing as a field in Anglophone philosophy (Evans and Smith 2018).

7 The Future of Confucian Tradition: Political Thought and Democracy

One final heuristic that captures how European and Anglophone philosophy have engaged Confucian thought is the attempt to theorize a Confucian modernity. This means extrapolating the tradition into the future. Perhaps the most significant example of this is found in political philosophy, since new ideas here can shape public life and political decisions in both China and the West. Certainly, scholars can draw on a wealth of Western political theory to imagine a modern Confucian polity. At the same time, the Confucian tradition also offers models of social order and community with global relevance, and which challenge orthodoxies in market-based liberal democracies. This includes examining the relationship between justice and harmony and whether liberal democratic societies have committed too much to the former and to the detriment of the latter (Li 2016); whether networks of social relations or *guanxi* constitute an important form of civil society, a corrective to centralized power (Lo and Otis 2003); and whether ritual can be used as a social mechanism to limit economic inequality and sustain social cohesion (Bell 2010: 38–53).

Here, however, we focus on Western scholars’ contribution to a single question of Confucian modernity: whether there can or should be a viable Confucian

democracy.³⁷ An obvious starting point for debate is the division between proponents of Confucian democracy and those favoring meritocratic rule. Both Chinese-language and Anglophone literature feature those sympathetic to meritocracy (Jiang 2014; Daniel Bell 2016; Bai 2014) and to democracy (Mou 1991; Lee 2005; Hall and Ames 1999; Tan 2003; Angle 2012; Kim 2018).³⁸ However, the issue is more complex than this basic dichotomy. Meritocrats can allow a limited role for democratic elections, while democracy can be elitist, as when representative democracy, in the form of party politics, generate de facto hierarchies of ruler and ruled. It is more helpful to determine the possibilities for Confucian democracy by analyzing some underlying constitutive questions.

The first is the compatibility question: whether the classical Confucian way and its values, lacking a tradition of liberal rights, are compatible with core features of democracy. There are quasi-democratic comments in texts like the *Mengzi*, such as the removal of tyrant rulers, and the proto-egalitarian notion that anyone can be a sage. Such sentiments, however, merely entail the replacement of one aristocratic ruler with another, while leaders offer virtuous models to be followed with little direct input from the populace. There is, for example, little trust that the common people will make wise decisions (Elstein 2010). This is unsurprising given the era's limited literacy and education.

Even if not explicitly part of the tradition, however, might a modern Confucian democracy be based on some classical Confucian values or at least suggested by them? This is partly a normative question: are Confucian values also democratic values, such that a modern Confucian polity should accommodate the latter? The answer generated by Western scholars is not always affirmative, however. Defending a largely meritocratic Confucian polity, Bell (2016) highlights some familiar limitations of democracy: uninformed voters can make poor electoral choices, while limited terms of government produce short-sighted and expedient policy. Democratic politics can also lead to greater incivility (Chan 201: 189). Conversely, greater virtue may be a basis for greater political authority. This explains meritocrats' fondness for unelected higher legislative chambers, populated by virtuous figures, which take into account a broader range of public interests over an extended period of time.

Arguably, however, such critics underestimate how democracy can cultivate virtues, and so acquire at least instrumental value to the Confucian tradition. The virtues cultivated can be civic or political, such as treating others as equals, but they might be the virtues and cultivated character central to classical Confucian perfectionism (Angle 2012). An argument for Confucian democracy might be: complete virtue requires excellence in all areas of life; this includes the public sphere; excellence in the public sphere means active engagement in managing the rules that govern it; and this requires democratic participation. Democracy is thus a modern means to a traditional Confucian end.

³⁷ See also the chapter "Contemporary Confucian Political Thought".

³⁸ On how contemporary scholars in China and Taiwan have approached modernizing Confucian political thought, see Elstein (2014).

This line of thinking faces challenges, however. Does the cultivation of good Confucian character really require political participation? The *Analects*, for example, portrays cultivation not as political participation but as family life, ritual command, and aesthetic delight as the grounds of cultivation, and hints that to be filial and fraternal is to engage in governing (2.21). If democracy is instrumentally valuable because it secures personal flourishing, the possibility remains that flourishing can be attained without democratic engagement. The goods of family and community life can be secured while public administration is left to benevolent and virtuous rulers. If flourishing does require political participation, this raises questions of what kind and how much. Furthermore, regarding democracy as only instrumentally valuable is not sufficient to establish a modern participatory democracy. Meritocrats also embrace the instrumental value of democracy. Limited, local elections prevent cronyism (Bell 2016: 150), ensure virtuous leaders and create at least a symbolic bond between the ruler and the ruled (Chan 2014: 85). This is why distinctions between democrats and meritocrats are sometimes blurred.

An alternative conception of Confucian democracy is offered by Deweyan democrats (Hall and Ames 1999; Fox 1997; Tan 2003). They start from Dewey's idea of the "Great Community" (Dewey 1946: 143–184): democracy is not instrumentally valuable but rather an intrinsically valuable way of life. Democracy is a "social idea" that extends beyond institutions of the state and affects "all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion" (1946: 143). The actions of each affect all, and so the consequences must be coordinated by the community. The state simply is the organized public realm, but with laws and enforcement. The idea of the individual and society existing in a harmonious relationship, symbiotically evolving, clearly resonates with classical Confucian values. Therein, society is constituted by roles and relationships and a family-like connection between ruler and ruled. For Deweyan Confucian democrats, coordination of this harmonious community is rooted in ritual participation and contextual judgments of appropriateness or *yi* 義 (Tan 2003: 79–88). Consistent with the classical Confucian texts, interest in the formal institutions and procedures of a democratic state, including elections, is limited.

This communitarian conception of Confucian democracy is also problematic. As noted above, harmonious and orderly civil society may be possible without participatory democracy. More importantly, this approach seems to undervalue the democratic institutions and procedures that sustain contemporary democratic participation, and the values that motivate such participation such as self-determination and political equality. Communication and regulation within an organic and holistic community require little commitment to such values (Kim 2018: 2). But why should Confucians value political rights and electoral participation?

Deweyan democrats, mindful of Confucian meritocrats' concerns about one person, one vote, might query whether political rights and electoral participation are valuable. Mindful of how classic liberal rights can lead to a pernicious atomistic individualism, this is precisely why Confucian Deweyan democrats have attempted to redefine democracy and equality in terms of equal participation in ritualistic social life (Hall and Ames 1999). Furthermore, political equality and procedural

fairness are typically associated with a state that is neutral between competing conceptions of the good life; but the Confucian tradition envisions a specific form of good society.

A commitment to political equality and self-determination, as intrinsically valuable aspects of democratic and electoral participation, while also recognizing that Confucian society aims at particular goods, has led to a third account of Confucian democracy: pragmatic Confucian democracy (Kim 2018).

This argument does not depend on compatibility with traditional Confucian political thought, however. Its starting point is contemporary and empirical: the state of East Asian societies today and their political needs. A problem with the abstract prescriptions of both meritocrats and many democrats is that they show little attention to the realities of contemporary East Asian political experiences (Kim 2018: 62). Empirical study reveals increasingly diverse societies, striving to coordinate decisions across the public realm. Given such conditions, institutionalized participatory democracy is the best (or least worst) political system for coordinated decision-making. This form of Confucian democracy does not emerge from an existing tradition of democracy, and so does not begin from the individual freedoms and rights of the liberal tradition. It is, rather, instrumentally useful. Furthermore, over time and with success, its success can lead citizens to value such democracy for its own sake. They come to identify with its constitutive values, including self-determination and treating other citizens as political equals, in “a way of life marked by equality of social relations” (Kim 2018: 51). Thus, Confucian citizens, although unsure of democracy at first, come to value it for its own sake, in a way of life that includes political goods not originally found in the Confucian tradition.

At the same time, this democratic way of life is, arguably, compatible with core Confucian social values—such as filial responsibility, respect for elders and, ritual propriety. After all, nineteenth century reformist Confucians who called for democratic reform did not thereby reject Confucian values, while current East Asian democracies take seriously laws to compel filial piety. The idea is that public reason—what counts are reasonable and what rights are recognized—in democratic societies with Confucian heritage will be shaped by Confucian values and Confucian conceptions of the good life. In this way, a commitment to democracy is compatible with Confucian social values, even as new political goods (equality, popular sovereignty, etc.) are also recognized. This account also responds to meritocratic concerns about one person, one vote. Since Confucian democrats are guided by a notion of the good society, they are less likely to vote from crude self-interest, and instead seek to realize collectively valued social practices, such as respect for elders. There will still be disagreement about policy and at the ballot box, since how best to enact such values will be disputed; but such disagreement honors political equality and self-determination, *and* a substantive notion of the good.

While this approach is refreshingly grounded in empirical claims about modern East Asian societies, it too faces questions. One is whether the account incorporates a sufficiently rich account of Confucian values and their practical implications. If a society is sufficiently diverse such that democracy becomes valued for its

coordinating effects, this suggests that the Confucian vision of the good life no longer commands widespread assent—other visions of the good life are equally attractive. If this is so, however, then it's questionable whether public reason can effectively serve to promote Confucian values. There might not be a consensus or majority to secure such goods. Arguably, the societal image that emerges here is a democracy in which citizens sympathetic to Confucian values are merely one group among others. Whether this can be called a Confucian democracy is debatable. That said, returning to the empirical starting claim, perhaps this is as much Confucian democracy as can be expected in East Asian societies increasingly less bound to a single cultural tradition.

All of these attempts at conceptualizing a modern Confucian polity face challenges. Nevertheless, they illustrate how contemporary and canonical Western thought is being used in imaginative extensions of the Confucian tradition.

In conclusion, looking to the future, what other kinds of encounters can be expected between Western scholarship and the Confucian tradition? A few new approaches are emerging. One is the use of science and experimentation to examine tenets of Confucian thought. For example, recent experimental research in embodied moral response has been used to support the Mencian moral psychology characterized by the four moral beginnings (Seok 2012). A second focus is the emerging “philosophy as a way of life” movement. This emphasizes wisdom and the everyday benefits of philosophical practice, and finds resonances in the Confucian tradition (Ni 2016; Lai et al. 2018). Beyond these, various pressing global problems invite Confucian thought to make its own contribution, such as the future of the environment (Brasovan 2017; Tucker and Berthrong 1998) or technology. No doubt other projects will emerge in due course. Contra Levenson, the Confucian tradition is very much alive, and Euro-American scholarship—increasingly in dialogue with Chinese-language work—is now a part of that story.

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