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**A Political Theory for Them – But Not For Us?  
Western Theorists Interpret the Chinese Tradition**

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Review Essay of:

Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, eds. *Confucianism for the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xxii, 398. \$85.00. \$27.00 paper).

Jiang Linxiang, *Ruxue zai guowai de chuanbo yu yingxiang* [*The transmission and influence of Confucianism abroad*] (Jinan: Jilu shuzhuang, 2004. Pp 386. RMB 22 paper.)

John Makeham, ed. *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Pp. vi, 284. \$75.00.)

Thomas Metzger, *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash Between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005. Pp. xxvii, 844. \$65.00.)

In the introductory paragraphs of any article on Chinese democracy, a certain catchphrase of Singapore's former president Lee Kwan Yew is a mandatory citation. Lee gained notoriety in the 1990s when he articulated "Asian values" as counterweights to Western democracy, reinforcing a centuries-old characterization of Chinese and East Asian political culture as necessarily authoritarian and state-centered. Western political theorists and area studies scholars are still reacting to Lee's dire depiction by scouring Chinese traditions for democratic tendencies and precedents for limited government. Many Western political theorists have gravitated toward the work of those Chinese thinkers whose philosophical giantesse – or overt resemblance to Western concerns – has warranted translation into English.<sup>1</sup> Area studies scholars construe the question of democracy in China more literally, often focusing on the economic and political transitions of late Qing and Republican China (c. 1850 – 1949) to determine the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup> Representative examples include Fred Dallmayr, "Humanity and Humanization: Thoughts on Confucianism," in Dallmayr, *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); and Brooke Ackerly, "Is Liberalism the Only Way to Democracy? Confucianism and Democracy," *Political Theory* 33 (August 2005).

prerequisites for democratization, like the growth of an independent civil society or means of political dissent, were nourished in the wake of Western impact.<sup>2</sup>

But neither Lee Kwan Yew, nor well-intentioned Western political theorists, nor area studies scholars trained in Western social science, even begin to exhaust the discourse on democracy in China. The books under review here give English-language readers a small taste of the *vast* literature speaking to and working within the contemporary continuation (some would say “revival”) of Confucianism in Chinese-speaking academic communities since at least the 1970s. Contra Lee’s insistence that Chinese political culture is necessarily and naturally authoritarian, this literature takes as its very starting point the assimilation of Western theories of science and democracy into indigenous Chinese political traditions. These books and the Chinese intellectual trends they discuss stand as powerful reminders that Confucianism and its traditions did not end when the Communists declared victory in 1949, only to re-emerge again in the 1990s as atavistic responses to the excesses of “Western” economic and political development. The movement dubbed “New Confucianism” (in Chinese, *dangdai xin Rujia* or *xiandai xin Ruxue*, among other various terms) offers an especially influential modern conceptualization of a democratic Confucianism that derives inspiration as much from Immanuel Kant and Henri Bergson as it does from Mencius and Wang Yangming.

What is so interesting about this movement, however, as well as the ongoing Chinese engagement with Confucian humanism in which it is embedded, is that its potential scope far exceeds the ambition many of its Western interpreters ascribe to it. The concern of many Chinese intellectuals, as both Thomas Metzger and John Makeham point out in their respective volumes, lies not simply in revitalizing China and its diaspora. The “Declaration on Behalf of Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Huge literatures have been generated in East Asian studies on the topic of civil society in China, especially during the 1990s; the symposium published in *Modern China* 19.2 (April 1993) offers an overview.

Culture” made by Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, and others in 1958 – long understood to be a watershed event in the history of the New Confucian movement – was “respectfully announced to the people of the world,” (*jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan*) not simply to other concerned Chinese.<sup>3</sup> The goal for many contemporary Chinese intellectuals continues to be formulating a political theory for *all* of us, a theory that through felicitous synthesis overcomes the deficiencies in both Chinese and Western thought to bring into being a compelling and persuasive vision for our future together.

In reviewing these recent books that engage Chinese political thought, I attempt to foreground the implications for Western political theorists of this broad potential application – something these books gesture toward but do not always pursue. The vitality of Confucianism in Chinese communities, not only in the form of mores but also of a thought-system capable of articulating compelling alternatives to Western ideology, suggests that its substance be taken seriously by more people than those who reside in such communities. What would it mean to treat the modern Chinese political thought presented in these books as compelling political theories, rather than as a tradition that, while not dead, depends for its vitality on injections from Western sources and whose application is limited to the ethnically Chinese? Can some variant of a reformed Confucianism really compete with Western political theories for the hearts and minds of Westerners, or has democracy and like precipitants of the Western tradition achieved permanent (and necessary) ascendancy in global society?

The title of the volume edited by Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong, *Confucianism for the Modern World*, promises to consider these important and compelling questions. Bell and

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<sup>3</sup> Makeham contests the status of the Declaration as a founding moment of New Confucianism, claiming that the movement lacked group coherence in the 1950s. Makeham argues instead that the ascription of such status is a product of New Confucianism’s “retrospective creation” in the 1970s (p. 27-9). See my further discussion of Makeham below.

Hahm in their introduction explain that the purpose of the book's contributions is to move toward *practical* application, rather than theoretical debate, of Confucian values in modern society. "The debate over Confucianism continues to be based on values and norms as contained in classical texts and historical past. Little work has been done to investigate linkages between Confucian ideals and concrete practices/institutions" (p. 4). The volume carefully attends to variations in non-Chinese experiences with Confucianism, noting that the philosophy continues to be an influence in Korea and Japan as much as in China, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

This wide ranging examination of Confucian societies outside of China is admirable, and the policy suggestions the contributors to this volume make are a sharp contrast to the usual philosophical digressions common to books of this kind. Despite the geographical breadth implied by the title, however, the book concentrates primarily on political situations not in the world but specifically those facing contemporary East Asians. Unfortunately, this unnecessarily narrows the audience for the book, undercutting its promise to deliver a Confucianism "for the modern world." Its ambiguously intended audience also prompts more questions: if the purpose of the book is to provide realistic alternatives to Western-style policies for people living in what the editors identify as "Confucian" societies, why was the book written in English and published by a Western academic press? English-language publication must by necessity exclude much of the best work done on these problems, which is still carried out mainly by Chinese-speaking academics (not Western-educated intellectuals). Even were this not the case, Bell and Hahm have done a laudable job soliciting contributions from an unusually and genuinely international panel of theorists and social scientists, nearly all of whom possess proficiency in more than one language. It may have contributed to the book's influence on current affairs in East Asia were it published in the contributors' respective languages.

The language of presentation is not, however, the only component of the book that belies its editors' promises for realistic, practical reform suggestions. So many of the argumentative strategies deployed by its contributors rely on interpretations of classic texts or historical precedents rather than empirical evidence of how people in East Asia actually think and live. The arguments put forward often bank on dubious cultural expectations about the character of East Asian society without providing supporting empirical evidence.<sup>4</sup> It is understandable that the editors identify Confucianism as a characteristic political culture of East Asians, but its status is overstated when other important cultural/political influences (including Buddhism, liberalism, and Marxism) go unexamined. Another rarely considered possibility is that many of the so-called "Confucian" tendencies the contributors to the book document (like family loyalty) are also extant in non-Asian societies.<sup>5</sup>

Jongryn Mo's article on the Korean censorate system of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is one example of this approach (others employing a similar approach include Hahn Chaibong, Joseph Chan, David Hall and Roger Ames, Chan Sin Yee, and Bell). Mo argues that the censorate system offers a culturally appealing Confucian precedent for political accountability, and that according to Western academic standards on governmental accountability it would be "effective" (pp. 56-8). However, he gives no evidence that East Asians would be more persuaded to adopt this arrangement than they would, say, more obviously

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that such evidence is limited to the data collection typical of modern Western social science, but that the acceptance by East Asians of such views is part of what should be examined, rather than assumed beforehand. As Metzger notes, "What are the intellectual ideas most likely to affect societal development? Opinion surveys in China can help answer this question, but this research...has to be complemented by in-depth study of attitudes extensively articulated in written texts and conversations [i.e., discourse analysis.] Such attitudes can be seen as consciously developed "doctrines" (xueshuo) or "trains of thought" (silu)." Metzger, *Cloud*, p. 694.

<sup>5</sup> Only one of the book's contributors, Geir Helgesen, offers empirical data, rather than theoretical speculation, about what East Asians might believe. His study compares the political opinion of respondents in Korea and Denmark, finding surprisingly that 75 percent of Danish respondents agreed to what was supposed to be a "typically 'East Asian' statement" that "The ideal society is like a family" (p. 165). Joseph Chan also notes similarity between his proposed plan for a voluntary donation scheme based on Confucian community values and the United Way charitable organization operating in the US (p. 252).

successful experiments in Anglo-American constitutional governance. After all, medieval canon law influenced many aspects of Western lawmaking, but its invocation as a historical precedent would convince few Westerners to adopt a system like that today. Mo's analysis also fails to assess how well such a censorate system actually worked in Korea: are there reasons it is no longer in existence? How well would its lack of vertical accountability – a problem Mo thinks can be dismissed by referring to the vague populism of Mencius (p. 63) – really work in a modern democratic state? Is the factionalism that brought about the censorate's downfall in the eighteenth century (p. 66) endemic or exogenous to the system itself?

These questions are further aggravated by the failure of the book to explain on what basis its many value judgments are drawn. Throughout the book, certain Western values at odds with traditional Confucian precepts, like gender equality, democratic participation, and egalitarian social relations, are for some reason accepted unproblematically as the basis for a modernized Confucianism. At the same time, other Western values (often those associated with the “excesses” of capitalism) are singled out for critique from a Confucian perspective. Many of the contributors – especially Bell, Hahm Chaibong, Lusina Ho, Hahm Chaihark, and Gilbert Rozman – seem to be operating on the assumption that “Confucian values” can contain whatever specific policy is assumed beforehand to be worthy of support (see especially pp. 182, 292, 333). Either way, the “Confucianism for the modern world” that emerges from this book functions not as a critical perspective on the basis of which judgments can be made, but as a black box into which any preferred ideal can be fit.

One strategy that may have prevented the resort to such essentialism would be the recognition that “Confucian democracy” is hardly new, but continues at least a century of cultural syncretism and innovation. Wang Juntao's contribution offers an overview of

“Confucian Democrats in Chinese History,” but interprets earlier Chinese thinkers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao as proto-democrats, rather than as theorists who sought answers to broad questions from a variety of sources, both Chinese and Western (e.g., pp. 79-80, 73-5). On one level, Wang’s essay succeeds in fulfilling the book’s aim: figuring out how China can come to grips with the reality of Western values, or what Bell and Hahm call “basic hallmarks of modernity as a social and political system” (p. 6). But on another level, such analysis comes at the expense of obscuring the larger cultural discourses in which these thinkers participated, and silencing the challenges to democracy their thought raises.<sup>6</sup> Wang’s essay, and much of the book, unnecessarily depict the engagement of Confucianism with democracy as a one-way street, rather than as an exchange in which Confucianism may quite possibly gain ascendancy beyond the range of East Asian societies. Admittedly, the book simply reflects the unfortunate reality that cultural borrowing and syncretism are more urgent concerns for non-Western intellectuals than for those working within the privileged philosophies of Europe and America. Yet the omnipresence of Western modernity need not mean that it must, as a matter of practicality, be adapted to; it can also be interrogated on a more fundamental level from a Confucian perspective.

That this is possible is demonstrated by John Makeham’s book *New Confucianism*, which details the ways Chinese thought – specifically the “New Confucian” movement – has repeatedly confronted the challenge of Western modernity without assuming it either as an a priori norm or telos. Both Makeham’s book and *Confucianism for the Modern World* share a focus on the conundrums created by Western political theory in the Chinese context, but Makeham and his contributors choose to analyze and collate existing literature in Chinese rather than solicit deliberate responses from English-speaking researchers. The Confucianism that emerges from

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, Wang glosses over important anti-democratic strains in Liang Qichao’s and Kang Youwei’s thought, most prominently Liang’s support of benevolent despotism in response to the instability of the Republic after 1911.



this survey does not appear as politically relevant as in the Bell and Hahm book; but Makeham's book does succeed in characterizing Confucianism more subtly as a diffuse, identity-forming practice, uneasily bound to cultural as well as philosophical expectations (p. 6, 32).

This book is valuable for at least two reasons. One, it fills an embarrassingly large gap in English-language literature on New Confucianism by providing well-researched vignettes on the thought of the major players in that movement (Mou Zongsan, Xiong Shili, and Liang Shuming). Work on New Confucianism – along with the more general topics of Confucianism's relationship to democracy, modernity, and human rights – swells the shelves of any Chinese-language bookstore, its volume exceeding perhaps even that generated on Rawlsianism in Anglo-American academia. Prior to Makeham's book, however, treatments of the New Confucian movement in English were largely limited to article-length overviews or passing references.<sup>7</sup>

Second, and more importantly, *New Confucianism* offers a critical but sympathetic evaluation of the movement itself in terms of its philosophy and its historical genesis. Makeham's introductory essay denies the claims made by some of its practitioners that New Confucianism existed as a coherent philosophical movement before the 1970s. He insightfully notes that “the ‘New Confucian’ label has exercised a homogenizing effect that has obscured complexities and philosophical differences at the expense of exploring the variety of forms in which Confucian-inspired philosophy has continued to survive throughout the twentieth century” (p. 43). Makeham's ecumenical approach somewhat justifies his controversial inclusion of

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<sup>7</sup> Among the earliest and still most influential of these articles is Hao Chang, “New Confucianism and the Intellectual Crisis of Contemporary China,” in Charlotte Furth, ed. *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). See also Lin Tongqi et al. “Chinese Philosophy: A Philosophical Essay on the ‘State-of-the-Art,’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 54 (August 1995): 727-758. One other book-length treatment of New Confucianism in English does exist, but its publication by a small research institute overseas rather than by a Western academic press has condemned it to limited circulation in America: Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism: The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 2001).

studies of the neo-Marxist thinker Li Zehou, and the philosopher Feng Youlan.<sup>8</sup> Song Xianlin's article presents another important angle on Makeham's historically informed critique by interpreting the development of New Confucianism on mainland China in light of the "culture craze" (*wenhua re*) of the 1980s. Like Makeham, Song uses historical analysis to illumine and interrogate the function of New Confucianism in Chinese society. It was not until August 12, 1978, Song notes, that "for the first time in over a decade the word Confucius was mentioned not to bring up its negative connotations of feudal society, but to call for a 're-evaluation'" (p. 83-4). Her analysis is not optimistic, however: she observes that these "efforts to reassert the 'ideal Confucian personality' and to revive traditional value systems bore few fruits in reality," suggesting the resurgence of interest in Confucius has little to do with the intrinsic worth of his philosophy (p. 100).

These examples demonstrate that readers looking for a philosophical engagement, as opposed to an informed intellectual-historical survey, of New Confucian thought will not find it in this book. The historical treatments of the New Confucians offered here are certainly philosophically sympathetic, but sometimes risk reducing New Confucianism to an epiphenomenon rather than recognizing it as a viable philosophy. That New Confucianism is as much a cultural as a philosophical movement should not discount its potential contribution to philosophical or political-theoretical debates, as Bell and Hahn's book reminds us. These debates can even be understood to include the methodologies by means of which New Confucianism itself should be assessed. For example, Makeham's book privileges thinkers who have launched system-building, philosophical interpretations of Confucianism at the expense of excluding equally influential but less overtly paradigmatic approaches of other New Confucian

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<sup>8</sup> However, it is revealing that both he and the scholars who contribute articles on Li and Feng to the book (Sylvia Chan and Lauren Pfister, respectively) still feel compelled to explain Li's and Feng's thought in terms of the New Confucian paradigm (p. 107, 169).

scholars like Xu Fuguan. This is a notable omission, because Xu's work on intellectual history and Chinese classical studies (*jingxue*) arguably constitutes as much a continuation and refinement of Confucian tradition as do the more philosophically oriented contributions of Mou and Xiong.<sup>9</sup> Although Makeham's introductory essay seeks to break down and expose the exclusions of the "New Confucian" category, his editorial selections replicate its historically unjustified bias against those who "merely research[] and describe[] Confucianism" (quoting Yu Yingshi, p. 36). Yet recent scholars (including Makeham himself, in other work) are increasingly recognizing the importance to imperial Confucianism of the kind of exegetical practices and historical research in which Xu and other New Confucians (like Qian Mu) engage.<sup>10</sup> That the research of such exegetes does not resemble in form contemporary Western philosophy as closely as does the work of Mou Zongsan is hardly a reason to exclude them; rather, it seems such disparity calls for greater investigation.

Indeed, one of the most surprising demonstrations of the ongoing influence of these very practices is Makeham's own attempt to wrestle with commonly given, genealogically-based definitions of New Confucianism. These definitions identify the movement not in terms of a set of tenets or shared questions, but in terms of genealogy and scholastic lineage (p. 38-9). This historical approach resonates more obviously with imperial Confucian devices for establishing "schools" (*xuepai* or *jia*) than it does with the typologies of modern social science. While rejecting as exclusionary and narrow the "proprietary claims over the entire Confucian tradition"

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<sup>9</sup> Xu's corpus, like that of the other New Confucians, is huge, but representative samples of his work on classical studies and intellectual history include *Zhongguo jingxue shi de jichu* [A foundation for the history of Chinese classical studies] (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1982); and *Liang Han sixiang shi* [Intellectual history of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties] (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., John Makeham, *Transmitters and creators: Chinese commentators and commentaries on the Analects*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and Jiang Guanghui, ed. *Zhongguo jingxue sixiang shi* [History of Chinese commentarial thought] (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2003).

via lineage analysis made by some mainland New Confucians (p. 44 and chapter 2), Makeham concedes their use in distinguishing New Confucianism as a movement from the broader explorations of Confucianism in the twentieth century (p. 36). His confrontation with this thorny problem of definition stands as a compelling reminder that “Confucianism” is a complex phenomenon with many facets, not just overtly political ones. Its rich intellectual heritage can challenge Western thought in multiple, subtle ways, including even how categories of analysis are imposed upon it.

Thomas Metzger’s book, *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essays on the Clash Between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today*, takes precisely these subtler challenges as its central problematique. His fundamental goals are twofold. One, to make clear that American and Chinese thinkers are informed by disparate epistemological assumptions and so “do not reason about political life in the same way,” and two, to provide an informed approach to political theory capable of overcoming this disparity (p. 2). Much of Metzger’s analysis repeats what are now commonplace diagnoses of the modern Western condition, including the fallout from what he rather awkwardly refers to as “The Great Modern Western Epistemological Revolution” or “GWMER” (p. 6) in the wake of the Western Enlightenment. His astoundingly informed interpretations, invocations, and assimilations of modern Chinese political thought more than makes up for these deficiencies. For all his overwrought cultural descriptions, Metzger manages to avoid falling into essentialism.

Instead of focusing on the overt practices of Confucianism like “filial piety” that occupied the Bell and Hahm book, or the historical trajectory of China’s contemporary intellectual trends as in Makeham’s, Metzger analyzes the deeper, recurring assumptions that Chinese and Western philosophy separately take as central. He believes these “platitudinous,”

unexamined assumptions about epistemology and ontology continue to inform and aggravate Chinese-Western political, social, and philosophical interaction. Building on his earlier work, Metzger calls the range of “epistemologically optimistic” premises that form the unexamined assumptions of most Chinese intellectual thought “Discourse #2,” and the “epistemologically pessimistic” premises underlying much Western thought after the “GWMER” “Discourse #1” (tables outlining the various distinctions can be found on pp. 17-19, 91-101). These are further elaborated as foundations for “rules of successful thinking” appropriate to each (pp. 109-115.) This rather stark dichotomy established in chapter one is refined through subsequent engagement with influential thinkers East and West, including Tang Junyi, Ambrose Y.C. King, Mao Zedong, John Dunn, John Rawls, and Friedrich Hayek. Metzger seeks to find a middle way between characteristics of the two discourses that hinder their mutual interaction, claiming both create an unfruitful “see-saw effect”:

If a political theory emphasizes the accurate description of the given political world and caution in defining the scope of knowledge [i.e., Discourse #1], it will fail to conceptualize hopeful, resolute action to improve political life; conversely, if it succeeds (whether or not in an excessive way) in conceptualizing hopeful, resolute action to improve political life [i.e., Discourse #2], it will fail to emphasize the accurate description of the given political world and caution in defining the scope of knowledge (p. 505).

At times Metzger states that as a Westerner he remains rooted in Discourse #2 (p. 68), noting correctly that even the very concept of a discourse is a product of the GMWER (p. 675); yet at others, specifically in his analyses of each thinker, he seems to assert (rather convincingly, in my view) that his trans-cultural perspective yields him a privileged vantage point from which to map out, and transcend, the “see-saw effect” induced by both discourses. Regardless, his book provides hugely important insight into the nature of East-West relations by destabilizing the “canons of rationality” grounding the epistemological assumptions common to each,

demonstrating through numerous case studies of individual thinkers the degree to which “reason” itself is questionable and subject to cultural interpretation just like any other norm (p. 23, 328.) Chapters 11 and 12 are especially notable for their use of Chinese philosophy and its “epistemological optimism” to challenge the claim of much Western analytic philosophy that human reason is limited: Metzger believes rather that Chinese philosophy (especially the contributions of Tang Junyi) call into question Western suspicions that conclusive knowledge about morality and politics can never be available (pp. 674-5).

At 800 pages, many parts of Metzger’s book are redundant, and he often repeats the identical sentence in various places throughout. His 100+ page introductory essay could have eliminated much of the redundancy but instead contributed to it. Judicious editing, less copious and more relevant footnotes,<sup>11</sup> and more tightly argued points would easily have halved the size of the book, making it much more accessible to the political theory readership to whom his title seems to appeal. So too would have been a more thorough engagement with contemporary political theory literature itself. Indeed, the reader is often left wondering why Metzger calls the social, ethical and empirical conclusions he draws from the two discourses “political” at all. If his point is to enlarge and expand the field within which we as a global society think about the political, he fails to articulate this explicitly as his goal, and so misses an important opportunity to use his Chinese sources in the service of such an ambitious undertaking. Though Metzger persists in calling his ideas “political theories,” his sources are drawn primarily from “classics” in fields like sociology and history (e.g., the work of Talcott Parsons and Max Weber) rather than contemporary work in philosophy or political theory that could add rigor to his methodology. For example, one of his main arguments for his “discourse”-based typology is the

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<sup>11</sup> One footnote on p. 566, for example, discourses excessively and for no apparent reason on the prose style of and grammatically erroneous sentences in John Dunn’s book *The Cunning of Unreason*.

“semantic and epistemological category” of the “we-group,” which to Metzger is the form through which indisputable, “platitudinous” claims are articulated and commonly accepted “rules for successful thinking” carried out (p. 75-6, 531 et passim). However, he ignores extensive literature in political theory, much of it informed by post-structuralism, highlighting the ways in which such “we-groups” impose a hegemonic and for that reason not necessarily representative identity on the people they include. Such work could, however, reinforce his point that the assumptions invoked by this “we” do express a powerful cultural force that definitively shapes approaches to commonly shared problems.

These considerations make clear that one can broadly endorse as accurate the two “discourses” and their epistemological assumptions Metzger presents, without for that reason condemning East and West to two perpetually disparate “we-groups”. This is commonplace; most theorists of culture and politics understand culture to have boundaries that are permeable and a content that is dynamic. The transformative borrowing that Jiang Linxiang’s book *Ruxue zai guowai de chuanbo yu yingxiang* [*The transmission and influence of Confucianism abroad*] so carefully documents, however, also gestures toward a reversal of the categories through which this cultural permeability is documented. For many centuries, Jiang’s book reminds us, it was Chinese thought – specifically, Imperial Confucianism – that formed the center of political discourse in East Asia. Jiang’s book includes a look not only at Confucianism’s transmission to Korea and Japan, but also to less obviously “Confucian” societies like Vietnam, Europe, and the United States. The usefulness of Jiang’s book, then, lies not only in the plenitude of details about Confucian history it provides; by its very arrangement, and how it goes about documenting the spread of Confucianism throughout history, it offers an implicit argument that Confucianism’s influence cannot be measured by the ethnicity of those who encounter it. Such

an historical trajectory further suggests that while Western thought now enjoys global ascendancy, this situation need not condemn Confucianism to a peripheral role, with value only for those unfortunate enough to be embedded from birth in its cultural frame.

One of the more telling contrasts of Jiang's book with the others under review here is his failure to define Confucianism (*ru*) or explain its importance. Such an omission on the one hand is oddly refreshing, signaling that for his Chinese audience a study of Confucianism no longer demands justification. On the other, what his book takes to be signs of the "influences" of Confucianism range from the transmission of texts to the implementation of Chinese political institutions like the civil exam. These multiple, unexamined components of "influence" broach the thorny problem Makeham also articulated in his study of New Confucianism, but do not provide a clear way of solving it: how can what is "Confucian" be distinguished from what is a more broadly "Chinese" influence? Jiang seems to assume that such distinctions can be drawn, and moreover that "Chinese Confucianism" can and should be usefully separated from the other cultural influences that mediated its transmission into foreign lands (e.g., p. 48). However, this simplistic assumption belies his own sensitive treatment of how the interpretation of Confucian teachings by other societies recalibrated its emphases: in Korea, filiality (*xiao*) rose to the fore; in Japan, loyalty (*zhong*) and adherence to the rites (*li*) (p. 72).

Jiang's historical narrative also brings to light an unusual difference between traditional and modern Confucianism that has gone unremarked in the other three books. He correctly identifies both eras as "dominated" by Confucianism, but in the traditional era this domination carried with it a strong dose of authoritarianism. It was only in the modern, post-dynastic era that Confucianism became unmoored from its authoritarian political framework and began to "dominate" purely in terms of intellectual influence. Yet surely this too has a consequence: the



cultural, politically backed influence that permeated Korea, Japan, and Singapore differs remarkably in substance and depth from the merely intellectual influence that reached Europe and America. The richness and breadth of the understanding that resulted was similarly attenuated, a fact which goes far toward explaining a certain orientation toward their subject matter displayed by the English-language books under review here that is not shared by Jiang's book.

In Korea and Japan, Jiang notes, engagements with Confucianism as a tradition took the form of transmission (*chuancheng*); in Europe and America, research (*yanjiu*) and explication (*chanshu*). Jiang fails to comment on the difference, counting both forms of engagement as "influences." For much of East Asia, however, Confucianism constituted the theoretical and cultural matrix by means of which problems were articulated. In the West it served rather as a target of critique for missionaries, an object of study for sinologists, and at best a distant exemplar of rationalized, godless government for men like Voltaire (e.g., 232, 261, 271). In a bizarre replication of this historical engagement, Makeham, Bell, Hahm and (to a lesser degree) Metzger in varying degrees all treat "Confucianism" as an object of research assessable by modern social scientific methods, not as a tradition to be undertaken on the basis of its intellectual cogency. Jiang's book, not in spite but because of its very lack of clarity with respect to what the tradition of Confucianism actually is, implies that Confucianism is not quite so analytically tractable but perhaps more easily assimilable in practice.

The historical evidence Jiang collects suggests that there are two ways of coming to terms with this realization: one, we can insist that Western thought, like Chinese thought, face the challenge of global syncretism, which is part of what those calling themselves "comparative political theorists" seek to do. (Jiang provides a revealing discussion of the development of the

“comparative” method in the West with respect to China, p. 312-3). Or, we can recognize that Chinese thought generates its own questions and responses whose relevance and significance is obscured if interpreted solely through the lens of Western political thought. Western thinkers, just like those in Korea and Japan, can use Chinese philosophy, not just study it; they can recognize that Confucianism illumines not only the deficiencies of their own theories, but also presents independently coherent tradition(s) of thought that can be undertaken and analyzed from within, rather than simply exploited for their comparative potential. Jiang’s sino-centric perspective, in fact, yields a narrative in which Chinese thought stands as a repository of insight equal to that we ascribe to Western political theory. Of the books reviewed here only Jiang’s gives a glimpse of how Chinese thought can be valorized as useful or interesting outside the parameters introduced by Western thought.

This is not to deny that the other three books I have reviewed here do not help to rephrase the challenge Chinese political thought presents to Western democracy and liberalism. In recognizing that Chinese thought contains within it philosophy for a “modern world,” these books resist the temptation to describe that thought in terms of its intransigence to change, freedom, or participatory governance. Instead, they celebrate it in terms of its comprehensiveness, majesty, and resilience. Yet significantly, Metzger, Makeham, Bell and Hahm all view the development or application of modern Chinese thought through the lens of Western modernity, especially as that modernity is expressed in terms of political institutions (democracy) or philosophical realizations (epistemological skepticism). Confucianism, these books severally declare, is certainly “modernizable” and capable of standing up to the Western challenge; but none dare claim it (as many of its supporters do) as their own way of life, much less as a world philosophy. These books have done an excellent job in renovating Confucianism to transform it

into a viable political theory, but they persist in characterizing that theory as one usefully employed not by “us,” but only by “them.”

It is worth asking, however, if such detachment is the only stance available (or appropriate) to the critically engaged Westerner. The pervasion of Western theories in China demonstrates if nothing else how malleable are the perspectives which constitute individual reasoning about political life. This intensive syncretism speaks against the restriction of a political thought-tradition to the lands of its historical embodiment in the Chinese as much as the Western case. If as cultures we cannot magically remake ourselves in the image of the “other,” or undertake the quandaries of her traditions, surely we can recognize that such is not the case for well-informed and sympathetic individuals. Individual perspectives on political life are not *dictated* by culture, however much they may be mutually implicated in it. Li Qiang’s liberalism, as reviewed by Metzger in chapter five of his book, seems to demonstrate just such a point: it does not seem odd to us as Westerners to see a non-Westerner advocate liberalism or socialism, but we would be quite taken aback were a Westerner to identify him or herself as Confucian.

Metzger’s book, which nowhere means to completely transcend a Western frame, actually offers a map of how just such a breach could be effected. The evolution of Metzger’s own perspective (shall we call it Discourse #1.5?) that unfolds throughout the book effectively elaborates his own “rules for successful thinking,” a process especially clear in his discussion of John Dunn’s political philosophy. Despite Metzger’s claims to the contrary, his own fascinating approach does not make for an easy fit within either Western or Chinese philosophy, however much it is ambitiously informed by both. This suggests that the kind of cultural knowledge displayed by Western researchers like Makeham and Metzger – neither of whom are political theorists – can be used not only to respond to the problem of “Confucianism and democracy,”

but to further interrogate it. So too can the work of the thinkers they document: the aggressive and informed syncretism of philosophers like Mou Zongsan, Li Zehou and Tang Junyi further challenges practitioners of Western thought to justify their own parochialism, not in spite of but because of the fact that these Chinese thinkers use Western thought so brilliantly to uncover hidden intimations within their own traditions. However much the work of these thinkers is self-consciously identified with the “Chinese culture” (*Zhongguo wenhua*) they believe is both the origin and sustenance of Confucianism, the effectiveness of their political theory does not terminate at the borders of China or its diasporic communities. If Western political theory is to meet the challenge of Chinese political thought, it must begin by considering seriously the stakes involved in their claims.