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How Should We Use the Chinese Past?

Contemporary Confucianism, the 'Reorganization of the National Heritage,' and Non-Western Histories of Thought in a Global Age

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Recent work in contemporary Confucian philosophy, particularly that written in English for a global academic audience, promises the holy grail of comparative philosophy: the elaboration of a globally compelling thought-system whose terms and practitioners are generally found outside of the Euro-American historical experiences that currently dominate global terms of knowledge-production. I argue, however, that in styling their Confucianism as adapted “for the modern world” many of these attempts rehearse problematic relationships to the past that—far from broadening Confucianism’s appeal beyond its typical borders—end up enforcing its irrelevance and dramatically narrow its scope as a source of scholarly knowledge. The very attempt to revitalize, modernize or reconstruct Confucianism assumes a rupture with a past in which Confucianism was once alive and relevant, fixing its identity (if not its practice or values) to a static historical place disconnected from the present. As a result, these reconstructions often turn on evocations of an “essence” or “spirit” of Confucianism that can be adapted to contemporary institutions and norms (most prominently those of liberal democracy) that go largely uninterrogated, rather than on Confucian precedents for knowledge that continue to discipline contemporary enquiry. The problem is thus not that these recent reconstructions are somehow “inauthentic,” but rather that they rest on a largely unacknowledged historical relationship which both narrows and constrains their engagement with Confucianism—ironically securing not the vitality of Confucianism in the modern age, but its “death,” as heralded half a century ago by the American sinologist Joseph Levenson (1958). To Levenson, Confucianism died when its terms became subservient to those of post-Enlightenment Western modernity, rendering its past heritage unable to ground

contributions to new knowledge or to structure judgments of value.

As someone who shares the contemporary Confucian commitment to develop a globally relevant non-Western philosophy, I ask if there are alternative means of situating past thought to present inquiry that might enable Confucianism—and, by extension, other forms of culturally-marked, “non-Western” philosophy—to overcome these problematic relationships to the past while maintaining contemporary relevance. True to this commitment to embody the relevance of past Chinese thought, I do so by examining some of the first discussions by Chinese intellectuals about how their past heritage might be identified and situated in the modern age. The particular discussions I examine here were carried on by a group of students and professors at Beijing University around the time of the May Fourth movement in 1919. They responded to a dilemma very similar to that articulated by Confucian modernizers: the dominant Chinese tradition, however understood, was widely agreed to be out of joint with the needs of the times, even as it was also recognized as a component of an enduring Chinese cultural and national distinctiveness worthy of preservation.

These debates, erupting in response to the profound mistreatment and disparagement of China by foreign powers, show that the methodological question of how to use the past is at the same time always a *political* issue about which part of which pasts are seen as meaningful and for whom. Their diverse responses identify the constraints—but also illuminate new possibilities—of learning from pasts with seemingly no direct connection to the social or intellectual problems of the present. I show that the two major responses to this dilemma—one a more radical response, associated with journals such as *New Youth* and *New Tide*, and the other a more moderate one, articulated by writers for the *National Heritage* journal—suggest more expansive and creative engagement with past Chinese thought and practice than that afforded by current reconstructions of Confucianism. As such, their discussions clear

more space for the contemporary global relevance of marginalized bodies of historically-situated thought and action. In this debate, radical voices posit a rupture with the past so as to bring democratic and scientific perspectives to bear on China's past literature, philosophy and history; the moderate response to their iconoclasm interrogates the privileged status of the present as a vantage point from which to adjudicate value. Both responses undermine the certainty of a singular or persistent Chinese past, enabling a creative presentism that encourages deliberate filiation with alternative "tracks" of past practice and thought. I go on to suggest that such filiative activities—which for some contemporary intellectuals took such forms as "reorganizing the national heritage" (*zhengli guogu*)—enable the global applicability of Chinese thought by tracing the continuities of its diverse lines of indigenous inquiry. These strategies achieve this applicability, I argue, without entailing the problematic implications that plague many current attempts to formulate a contemporary Confucian philosophy—namely the reduction of Chinese thought to a set of already-existing cultural values inhering in specific ethnic or cultural groups, the postulation of a timeless "spirit" of Confucianism that is presumed to persist unchanged since the classical era more than 2500 years ago, or the suborning of Confucianism's internal diversity to the dominant terms of contemporary liberal analytic philosophy. As such, they offer more promising paths toward a modern, globally relevant non-Euro-American philosophy.

I begin by examining the arguments of several prominent contemporary Anglophone Confucian philosophers, whose attempts to modernize Confucianism unintentionally pose a rupture between past and present that endangers Confucianism's global relevance. I then go on to consider the alternative possibilities that emerge out of the May Fourth debate over the "national heritage," articulated by such thinkers as Fu Sinian, Hu Shi, Mao Zishui, and Zhang Xuan. I conclude by considering the relevance of my findings for longstanding tensions in the history of political thought, such as between historical context and theoretical creativity. I

argue that the typical binary between history and philosophy must be renegotiated if we are to enable the global relevance of marginalized bodies of thought, Chinese and otherwise.

Confucianism for the Modern World

That Confucianism is in need of “modernization” is not an argument so much as a premise of many recent attempts in English, Chinese and other languages to make Confucianism a philosophically compelling philosophy. Sometimes this reconstruction takes the form of translating classical Confucian ideas into terms of modern applicability—such as reading concepts of “justice” and “social welfare” into early Confucianism (Bai, 2008; Cline, 2013; Fan, 2010). It may also involve the identification of certain timeless “core values” of Confucianism which are retained for contemporary analysis, even as others—typically those supporting practices now taken to be problematic, such as gender discrimination or class hierarchy—are filtered out without compelling explanation (Bell, 2006). Although these attempts are diverse, they generally tend to share a conviction that the inadequacies of past Confucian thought can be remedied by integration with some favoured set of philosophically defensible values.¹

These efforts are not necessarily problematic. Indeed, the best of this work deftly employs analytic method and textual accuracy to showcase the value of Chinese thought in disciplines such as philosophy and political theory, which have historically remained preoccupied with Eurocentric texts and questions (e.g., Ivanhoe, 2000; Tan, 2004). From a certain perspective, the historical context which enabled such a narrowed discourse to come into being, and its interpreters to flourish, is likely not as important as the fact that it has, and they do. The same interpretive stance is taken, as Confucian interpreter Joseph Chan has recently pointed out, by contemporary Aristotelians or Kantians: they are not usually concerned with establishing what these thinkers meant in their own context, so much as they

want to use their ideas to shed light on contemporary problems via exegesis and critical comparison (Chan, 2014: 207–8).

However, Chan’s analogy between contemporary Aristotelians and contemporary Confucians may not be as apt as it appears. The Confucians of Chan’s analogy, unlike contemporary Aristotelians or Kantians or Platonists, find themselves conforming for their very identity as “philosophers” to academic standards constituted largely independently of the tradition in which they claim to work. Attempts to make Confucianism relevant cannot turn—as uses of past Western thought potentially might—on a presumed continuity between present philosophy and those past thinkers who are seen to constitute the terms of the discipline. As Levenson noted, assessing Confucianism’s value in terms of another tradition pretty much signals the end of a tradition as valuable in itself, rather than as valuable simply because it is ours. These attempts do not continue the Confucian tradition, despite their claims to the contrary, so much as replicate its vocabulary within some other kind of tradition (often Anglo-American analytic philosophy). These “modernizations” or “reconstructions” of Confucianism effectively pose a rupture between past and present—that is, a break in the historical continuity that in earlier times made the past ideas and practices of Confucianism seem at home in the present, but which now estranges those ideas and practices from contemporary values. “Ruptures,” of course, are not objects or events simply discovered in history, but interpretive modes of making sense of the past (Mazlish, 2011). In this particular case, the rupture marks a (largely implicit and undefended) presupposition that disempowers past values and experience, while simultaneously imbuing the present or “modern” era with greater relevance to particular kinds of inquiry.

One recent example might be found in the work of Stephen Angle, whose book *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* develops a “progressive” version of Confucianism that takes on questions raised by contemporary commitments, including those

to egalitarianism and democracy.² In contrast to many self-described “Confucians,” Angle self-reflexively and directly confronts many of the political issues surrounding the invocation and identity of Confucianism. He does not, that is, reduce Confucianism unproblematically to a national heritage, or act as though its classical articulations are somehow “purer” versions of what is ultimately a historically situated and longstanding tradition whose meanings have been subject to change over time—assumptions which lie behind the otherwise bizarre reliance on an unusually selective set of early texts to represent the “Confucian tradition” in many attempts to revive it (e.g., Bell, 2006; Chan, 1998). But it is precisely because Angle is so aware of the very problems that have bedeviled his fellow Confucian travelers that his work makes for such revealing analysis.

Angle explicitly situates his work as a continuation and elaboration of the Confucianism of Mou Zongsan, who was himself notable for attempting to revive Confucianism through integrating the work of both Western and Chinese philosophers such as Hegel, Kant, Bergson, Mencius and Zhu Xi. Angle argues that Mou’s complex concept of “self-negation” (derived from Hegelian philosophy) provides grounds for a Confucian argument that politics “must be independent from morality, or else it, too, would be endlessly unfinished and inadequately protective” (Angle, 2012: 24). Angle goes on to explore how particular kinds of institutions associated with liberal democracy might not only enhance, but be required by, Confucian moral principles if those are to be successfully embodied in society rather than existing solely in the minds of existing adherents.

His argument thus diverges from many defenses of a “Confucian democracy” that turn on finding prototypes for popular rule and sovereignty in ancient texts (Angle, 2012: 39). Angle chooses rather to reconceptualize democracy to better reflect, yet at the same time critically reconstruct, what he calls “the core concerns of the evolving tradition” of Confucianism (Angle, 2012: 8). One example of such a commitment is the neo-Confucian

normative concept of *li* (or “coherence,” an idea that Angle explains is “based on the insight that the identity and role of anything depends on its relations to many other things and purposes,” p. 48). “As Confucians as different as Mencius and Zhu Xi both emphasized,” Angle argues, “each of us has the capacity to recognize and respond to ethically salient aspects of our world.” (Angle, 2012: 50) *Li* can enable an integration of those diverse relational perspectives, filling out a rich conception of “the people” that departs from traditional views of them as blind and inferior masses (Angle 2012: 50). Angle goes on to show how these possibilities might be grounded in something like Zhao Tingyang’s normative concept of “all-under-Heaven,” which requires us to “view the world from the perspective of the world” (see, e.g., Zhao, 2006). This perspective, Angle argues, “requires us to arrive at the universal world perspective through an inclusive process, rather than universalizing a single perspective” (Angle, 2012: 89). Human rights and other such cherished principles of modern liberal philosophy can in this way then be figured as relevant and autochthonous in Confucian philosophy, even if they did not derive solely or immediately from prior Confucian values.

Angle’s approach offers much that is valuable for those committed to doctrines such as human rights, but who also wish to acknowledge simultaneously the modern worth of Confucian philosophy. Yet we must ask whether his reconstruction of “progressive Confucianism” reflects not only autonomous philosophical commitments but also particular kinds of power relationships which sustain and transform Confucianism over time and space. These power relationships include, of course, the invocation of Confucianism to incite nationalist sentiment in the PRC and elsewhere (an appropriation that Angle does acknowledge) but also the more subtle and ironic dilemmas created by Angle’s own approach: Confucianism in his analysis is figured as relevant and “modern” only to the extent that it can accommodate the values of some form of liberal democracy. In chapters 4 and 6, for example,

the Confucian ritual regulation of behavior is made compatible with the rule of law—which features in the book’s conclusion as a component of the progressive Confucian polity. In Chapter 7, Confucianism’s failure to adequately recognize the fact of structural oppression is combined with an exhortation to further develop the tradition’s existing concern for developing moral capacity, significantly supported by values (such as mutual respect, dialogue and openness to new ideas) that are neither particularly salient in Confucianism nor unfamiliar to most contemporary liberal or democratic philosophers (Angle 2012: 132).

These may be important steps toward modernizing Confucianism, but the very framework of such a modernization project—in which Confucianism is positioned to accommodate certain foundational commitments of liberal democracy, rather than generating any of independent value itself—is a brilliant demonstration of Levenson’s thesis that Chinese precedents are no longer capable of informing action in the present. Revealingly, the three distinctive components of Angle’s progressive Confucian politics—ethics, ritual, and law—are shown in the conclusion to support a reassuringly familiar human rights regime constituted by rule of law and popular authority (Angle 2012: 136-144). Angle’s work here emblemizes what we might term the “New Confucian gambit”: the proposition or assumption that Chinese thought can establish its philosophical relevance only by adapting its heretofore neglected traditional modes of thought to the terms of modernity, which are taken as given and typically identified with some version of democracy. But in doing so, this gambit draws an implicit line between a past in which Confucian thought was self-evidently relevant to analyzing social and political life, and a present in which the terms through which historically-existing Confucianism generated and assessed knowledge are abandoned. This line is drawn in order to secure the very existence of Confucianism in a modern world dominated by what are presumed to be very different categories and commitments.

These tensions are also on view in Joseph Chan's recent attempt at critical reconstruction, which he calls Confucian perfectionism. Chan notes "the importance of correctly capturing the spirit of the Confucian ideal," but argues that "it is not always easy to tell whether such views belong to the level of ideal (that is, those whose spirit needs to be kept) or the level of nonideal (that is, those whose contents and challenges vary with changing circumstances)" (Chan, 2014: 15). Chan of course acknowledges (on the very same page) that Confucianism has changed throughout time, but this historical fact appears irrelevant to his insistence that there exists some set of decontextualized and transhistorical "ideal" views which constitute the true "spirit" of Confucianism. The political perfectionism that Chan advances on the basis of these ideals does not challenge Rawlsian analytic liberalism, so much as adapt to its terms: Confucians today "should adopt some liberal democratic institutions but justify them with the Confucian perfectionist approach" (Chan, 2014: 18) even as their appeal to the "specific values and principles in Confucian thought" in political life and policymaking must necessarily be justified "in terms that do not require prior acceptance of Confucianism" (Chan, 2014: 23). Consonant with Rawls' "overlapping consensus," then, Confucianism becomes one among many ideas under the umbrella of liberal pluralism: such ideas provide alternative content for the range of commitments debated in the liberal public sphere, but do not directly challenge the content of that sphere or how it draws the boundaries of political space.³

In the next section I illuminate the shortcomings of this New Confucian gambit by surveying alternative modes of relating to the past, articulated in a set of germinal debates in the early Republican period (circa 1919). These debates suggest that the New Confucian gambit does not revive an intellectual or philosophical tradition, so much as it reproduces a rupture between past and present in such a way as to endanger the possibility that historically-existing traditions of thought associated with Confucianism might offer

normative purchase on contemporary problems. They also remind us of the range of ways earlier Confucian thinkers argued for the integration of historical awareness with philosophical argument, in contrast to the decontextualized and ahistorical philosophizing currently undertaken by its contemporary adherents.

The Chinese Past at Beijing University, 1919

Confucianism's lack of fit with its times has, apparently, long posed a problem for both its adherents and its detractors. In the *Analects* Confucius himself feels compelled to defend his adherence to the Zhou rituals that by his time already seemed outmoded; and early critics including the "Legalist" Shang Yang argue that Confucian reliance on historical models fails to recognize how significantly conditions change from one era to another. The progressive and scientific premises of modernity only made these existing problems of anachronism and temporality more acute. China had become a republic in name by 1911 but its imperial past continued to influence thought and politics. Newly-elected President Yuan Shikai attempted to install himself as emperor in 1915 and dismissed the parliament. His timely death shortly thereafter did not, however, definitively resolve issues such as China's heavy foreign debt or its lack of democratic experience. When German concessions in China's Shandong province were ceded to Japan under the Versailles Treaty, national rage and embarrassment at Allied treatment sparked protest marches and rallies. These events and their intellectual, social and cultural aftermath—metonymically called the May Fourth Movement, for the well-known protest activities that began on 4 May 1919—also led intellectuals to question the sources of China's perceived national weakness. Radical voices located that weakness in the historical tendency of China's elite classes to uncritically emulate the codes of conduct, values, standards of literary merit, and political and social institutions found in ancient canonical texts, without first determining their fit with contemporary conditions. Some of these "New

Culture” or “May Fourth” intellectuals called for a wholesale rejection of these past texts and practices, which they associated with an undifferentiated Confucianism, to be replaced with values of science and democracy more appropriate to “modern” times.

The debates I examine here between students and professors at Beijing University is emblematic of these wider intellectual tensions about the production of knowledge in changing times. The debate is of course not the first or only attempt by Chinese in the last two centuries to confront the legacy of their past, or to gauge its fitness as a guide for present action. In some ways this question defines the late-nineteenth century reform generation, beginning with the revisionist work of Kang Youwei. “National Essence” (*guocui*) scholars including Zhang Taiyan and Liu Shipei (himself a contributor to the *National Heritage* journal and a mentor for its young writers, until his death from tuberculosis in 1919) had begun articulating non-canonical alternatives to specifically “Confucian” Chinese pasts for at least two decades prior to the Beida discussions, encouraging a distinctively revolutionary, ethnocentrically Han vision of Chinese civilization.

Yet by 1919, when the debates examined in this essay largely took place, many overseas Chinese students were returning home with greater knowledge of life in the West than earlier generations; those who remained were more exposed to foreign ideas through an increasingly wider availability of foreign books, often in translation. Their cosmopolitan backgrounds lent unique urgency to questions of how the Chinese past might be used in a globalized and modern setting, particularly one dominated by calls for “Europeanization” (Luo, 2000: 60). As a result, these intelligentsia ultimately were more interested in establishing continuity with the Chinese past as a means of shaping new meaning for being “Chinese,” rather than as a means of preserving traditional forms of Chinese identity (Schneider, 1971: 34). Their discussions thus speak most clearly and directly to dilemmas faced by comparative philosophers and political theorists in general, and Confucian

reconstructionist philosophers in particular, as they integrate past Chinese ideas and practices with those values—typically identified as “Western”—that set the terms of present philosophical relevance.

Although May Fourth discourse has sometimes been characterized (especially by participants themselves) as a series of Manichean clashes between iconoclastic tradition-haters versus misguided conservatives, interlocutors in this debate shared a surprising number of basic premises that bely such easy dichotomies. Writers for all of these journals, including the supposedly more “conservative” *National Heritage*, affirmed the need for new, critical assessments of the Chinese past, in order to assess its fit with what they called “the needs of the times.” All were interested in thinking through the creative and promising implications of “Europeanization” (*Ouhua*), which generally meant learning from European and American political and social, as well as technical, knowledge; embracing a scientific approach to historical and social problems; supporting democratic governance; and broadening the appeal of scholarship to non-elite audiences. These aims were bound up for all participants in the question of what to do with learning, or how to be a “scholar” (*xuezhe*), in an age where the civil examination system no longer guaranteed employment and identity to the educated classes (Forster, 2014: 79). Notable differences between these interlocutors emerge, however, on the question of whether the Chinese past should or does enjoy continuity with the present, in light of modern conditions largely understood in European terms. Writers for journals such as *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) and *New Tide* (*Xin Chao*) argued that the failure of traditional Chinese thought—typically identified by all participants as “past scholarship and thought” (*gudai xueshu sixiang*), which includes both classical works as well as their schools of exegesis and traditions of philological analysis—to “respond to the times” (*ying shi*) rendered it an object of historical research only. These debates were, in fact, touched off by the suggestion made by the fiery young radical Mao Zishui that the Chinese “national heritage”

(*guogu*) was “dead” in the face of the overwhelming vitality of Europeanization (Mao, 1919b: 734).

Mao joined a chorus of voices, including that of well-known radical Chen Duxiu, in promoting science and democracy as alternatives to what they perceived as an obsolete and stagnant Chinese way of life. But his essay, and the debate it spawned, was distinctively focused not on the benefits or content of Westernization but on the status of the Chinese “national heritage”—specifically what role, if any, the Chinese past might play in the present and future, for whom, and in what way. His own views were countered by writers for the journal *National Heritage* (*Guogu yuekan*), who argued that the past continued to play a role in the future of both China and the broader world. Mao’s key interlocutor, Zhang Xuan, penned an essay soon after the events of 4 May 1919 affirming the existence of a continuous Chinese past marked by evolution continuing from past to present. He therefore claimed that Mao’s proclamation of the “death” of a body of thought was a largely subjective opinion (Zhang, 1919a: 1b)—particularly given the efforts of his fellow writers to continue indigenous lines of research into the Chinese past, and to innovate new standards for evaluating past scholarship.

Their disagreements ultimately turned on the conditions under which new, legitimate knowledge might be produced on the basis of materials from the Chinese past—the precise question faced by Confucian reconstructionists, but one rarely so explicitly parsed. Mao Zishui associated those conditions for new knowledge exclusively with Europeanization, but assured his readers that such a move did not imply China simply imitating the West. Rather, Europeanization was simply a tool for producing scholarship that by his definition is not limited to specific nations or locales. When a patient takes medicine prescribed by his physician, Mao argues, that medicine becomes a part of him; it is not the doctor’s property any longer. Similarly, in ingesting Western standards of thought and scholarship to organize

what in his view were the “muddled” and “unsystematic” materials from China’s past, Chinese scholars can contribute to a “national present” (*guo xin*) that is also at the same time a contribution to universal knowledge (Mao, 1919b: 735). As Laurence Schneider has pointed out, the national present embodied notion that China and any nation’s history consists in reality of a series of changing “nows” (Schneider, 1971: 29). This did not mean abandoning the Chinese past, but it did entail examining it less for its inherent literary or philosophical merit and more for its historical features—the way a doctor autopsies a corpse (Mao, 1919a: 40, 1919b: 737).

Mao’s colorful medical analogies reduce China’s past to a collection of dead historical materials that offer no vital use, but do pose some risks, to people living in the present. The best that can be done with this past is to systematize and re-order it according to new scientific standards, an activity he calls “study of the national heritage” (*guogu xue*) and which he carefully distinguishes from the substance of the “national heritage” per se, which he defines as “past scholarly thought and history” (Mao, 1919b: 733).⁴ Attempts to learn from or extend that heritage, such as the insistence on using *guwen* (classical or, literally, “ancient” Chinese) for literary expression, is an exercise in contradiction, because the national heritage by definition cannot form part of the present:

My readers should understand one thing, which is that this “ancient Chinese” they talk about does not qualify as “national heritage.” This is because their [work] is already not past scholarly thought and history (because the classical Chinese of today’s times is made by contemporary people), nor is it the result of contemporary people applying proper methods to research the national heritage. The “study of the national heritage” (*guogu xue*) by contemporary people is “national renewal” (*guoxin*), a kind of science (Mao, 1919b: 744).

In a later elaboration, Mao further explains that using past materials to pursue new scholarship is just a shortcut method for saving time and brainpower; it is the means by which scholarship can advance, but *not* the means by which it is actually produced (Mao, 1919a: 39). That is, new knowledge can only be considered legitimate (*hefa*) on the basis of its meaningful contribution to a scientific body of thought, identified by these writers with Europe (Mao, 1919a: 54). Knowledge turned to any other purpose is at best a “shortcut,” or, at worst, some kind of dangerous disease communicated from the dead corpse of the past (Mao, 1919b: 737–738).

The scientific study of the past called for by Mao was shared by his colleagues at the *New Tide*, including Fu Sinian and Gu Jiegang. Fu co-edited the journal, and years later would lend germinal institutional and academic support to the practice of Rankean historiography in China (Wang, 2000: 62, 73–74). He added an endorsement to Mao’s article praising its support for historicism, and underscoring its identification of the Chinese past as “materials” (*cailiao*), not “substance” (*zhuyi*) (Fu, 1919: 746). Fu elaborated many of these ideas in an earlier 1918 article for *New Youth* discussing literary revolution. For Fu and most other May Fourth intellectuals, it was in the field of language and literature that the stakes of their particular historical perspectives played out most dramatically. Traditionally Chinese scholars viewed literature, particularly the ancient classics, as having a pedagogical purpose: imitating their substance as well as their literary style was believed to help cultivate appropriate kinds of moral sensibility. Fu argues in contrast that literature should now be seen as a historical product, part of the past rather than the present. As such, these past forms of literature, including the classics, are not fit to directly inform current values or practices which have emerged in response to very different social and political conditions (Fu, 1980: 1051–1052). Written literary Chinese, anchored as it is in classical allusions and archaic

grammar, should be replaced by a vernacular language and literature that matches more closely how people actually currently speak (Fu, 1980: 1060). It is fine to study this historical body of literature, Fu assures his readers, but we must “use the ancient people, and ultimately not be used by those ancient people” (Fu, 1980: 1057). Present conditions and attitudes are, presumably, the only accessible, reliable, and correct guides to how the past should be interpreted.

Such affirmations of the superiority and transparency of present values gave rise to competing modes of relating to the past, in which the present and its values were situated as simply one perspective in a longer process uniting past and future. Many of these responses appeared in the “Opinion” section of the *National Heritage* journal, offering theoretical support to more empirical research articles on traditional topics including paleography, classicist hermeneutics, and philology. Zhang Xuan initiated debate directly with Mao Zishui in a May 1919 essay, arguing that present values, practices and ideas—even including science and scientific method—were necessarily evolved (*jinhua*) from past ones. On the basis of such continuity, Zhang contends, anything that has evolved out of the national heritage and exists today is by definition *part* of that heritage, not only its object of study. That is, in contrast to Mao Zishui, Zhang insists that contemporary ideas and practices necessarily have a connection to the past and can only be considered in relation to it; for that reason, the national heritage is not only not “dead” in the past, but alive in the present (Zhang, 1919a: 1b). As further evidence, he cites the obvious fact that present-day people continue old ways of sentiment and practice; these have not entirely been displaced by modern, Western versions (Zhang, 1919a: 2a). For these reasons, Zhang continues, it makes no sense to speak, as Mao does, about the “national heritage” being the object of study of something called “study of the national heritage.” Rather, the content of the “national heritage” is one thing together with “the study of the national heritage”: the national heritage constitutes the

method, and not only forms the object, of proper study. Merely reorganizing materials for study constitutes part of the national heritage, but is not reducible to it (Zhang, 1919a: 3a).

Zhang illustrates this point by examining the relationship between new and old. The national heritage is that which makes possible the creation of new knowledge, and is not only that which has already been known:

When speaking of evolution (*jinhua*), ‘new’ is the name of the future. ‘Old’ (*gu*) is the name of the foundation of seeking the new. When what is new is first obtained, then it is called new. And then once it is obtained, it is integrated into the old (Zhang, 1919a: 2a–2b).

Viewed as the evolutionary outcome of the past, the present becomes a much less certain vantage point from which to adjudicate value: it is, as Zhang indicates in the passage above, only a fleeting moment that marks the evolutionary process moving on from past to future. Newness is an ephemeral quality that passes into “old” soon after it emerges. This same logic also shows that the national heritage changes over time, in response to present conditions, and thus necessarily gives rise to innovation—which for Mao is a key criterion of vitality. If there was no innovation in the national heritage, Zhang argues, then scholars in the past would have continued reading the same old books over and over (Zhang, 1919a: 1b). Rather, the very point of learning is to “forge ahead” (*jin qu*), often in respectful disagreement and debate with others (Zhang, 1919b, 1919a: 2b).

Zhang’s insistence on the importance of the past is therefore not to discount the potential efficacy of present action. His colleague at the *National Heritage*, Yu Shizhen, is particularly emphatic that actions taken in the present are not only effective, but necessary, in cultivating connections to the past and to render them intelligible guides for the present and

future. Yu wrote a series of “Opinion” essays written in richly allusive literary Chinese to situate his classicist research within current debates. His main concern is not that the past is dead and in need of revival, but rather that its records and impressions are so profuse and scattered that the past can be easily invoked by charlatans to justify policies that accord more with current desires than with the lessons of ancient sages (Yu, 1919b: 1b, 2b). Its disorganized character, meanwhile, encourages squabbles over interpretation and gives rise to scholarly and political factions who advance their own partial views, sometimes using forged documents (Yu, 1919b: 1b).

Yu’s concerns about the forgery and obfuscation attending the transmission of past material closely echo those of Qing dynasty empiricists, whose techniques of *xungu* (“text criticism”) and *kaoju* (“evidential scholarship”) were adopted by many *National Heritage* writers as a means of verifying the authenticity of historical documents, including the Confucian classics (Shen, 1984: 24). But in the context of these May Fourth debates, Yu’s concerns are tied to a further argument. Yu contends that the past serves an irreducible purpose in *resisting* rather than merely responding to the needs of the times. Like many other young scholars during the May Fourth era, Yu endorses the use of scientific validation and other currently available methods to research and order the past. He recognizes that past solutions may not work in present-day conditions and criticizes those who cling needlessly to the “outmoded” (Yu, 1919b: 2a, 3b). But he strongly opposes the widely prevalent May Fourth idea that contemporary values automatically and necessarily guide our engagement with the past, because too often scholarly pursuits become unduly influenced by the fashions of the day, or corrupted by politics, personal desires, and factional squabbles (Yu, 1919b: 2b–3a). Examining and ordering the past can help to eliminate these partial perspectives in the ongoing search for new knowledge:

In earlier times [this process] was described as: ‘grasp the way of the old, so as to meet the demands of the present. Examine old tracks, to know future tracks.’ ... Once what is past can be observed, the contributions of people in the past act as standards; once what is to come can be known, then the new ways are illuminated (Yu, 1919a: 1b, see also 1919b: 3a).

Here, “being clear about what has come before” and “grasping the way of the old” intends an organization of the past, to clarify its meanings but also to find new ones (Yu, 1919b: 2b). In doing so, longstanding misconceptions about the meaning of classic texts—such as the belief that they support autocracy at the expense of popular welfare—can be wrested out of the hands of corrupt scholars and their alternative interpretations laid bare to the masses (Yu, 1919b: 2b–3a). The well-organized past and its meanings come to operate as independent “standards,” becoming less susceptible to interpretive misunderstanding or, worse, deliberate obfuscation. These concerns echo those expressed by Yu’s mentor Huang Kan, who in his inaugural essay for the journal argues that “The barbarity or civility of change, is not determined by which is weak and which is strong; the correctness or incorrectness of a way (*dao*) is not distinguished by which is old and which is new” (Huang, 1919: 1b).

For Yu and Huang, the unreliability of the past and our uncertain connections to it must be rectified in order to gain normative traction on the contemporary situation. Yu describes these projects of reconnection as gathering up “the ends of thread” (*xu*) or “strings” (*guan*, literally the strings that tie together coins of copper cash) that lie about, “binding” (*tong*) them to the present as a means of illuminating their possibilities (e.g., Yu, 1919a: 2b). Such “binding”—a longstanding metaphor in Confucian scholarship—works precisely because “past and present are of one tally,” Yu argues; “therefore they do not have separate tracks” (Yu, 1919a: 2b). Whereas for *New Tide* writers, particularly Fu Sinian, evolution and

change were pictured as a succession of time periods that showed how different past and present were, for Yu it was “a continuum of eternal ‘trails,’” showing the “joints” or “rhythm” (*jiezu*) that linked old and new (Forster, 2014: 86). For Yu and his colleagues, the use of literary Chinese (*wenyan*) was key to alignment with these “trails.” Reading and using such language reinforced normative connections to history by enabling knowledge not only of past sagely wisdom, but also of historical analogies that could both be “verified” by the present, as well as offer alternatives to existing conditions (Yu, 1919a: 2a). Yu summed up this work of making connections as “distinguishing the various techniques, drawing together the hundred schools, implementing them to respond to change, tidying and regulating them to confront the world, warming up the old to understand the new, illuminating *ti* to reach the *yong*” (Yu, 1919a: 2b).⁵ Huang Kan identified such work as “broadening the *dao*” (Huang, 1919: 1b).

These modes of reconnection, which we may call filiative activities, were not endorsed only by *National Heritage* scholars.⁶ Attempts to “reorganize the national heritage” (*zhengli guogu*) were undertaken by *New Tide* writers such as Fu Sinian and Gu Jiegang in the spirit of scientific inquiry and concern for national identity.⁷ This reorganization sought to apply scientifically rigorous methodology to the research of China’s past textual material, including recovery of lost works and settling issues of authorship and authenticity, as a means of solving the problems of today (Hu, 1919: 131–2; Eber, 1968: 169). Although seemingly at odds with the iconoclasm of Mao Zishui, these efforts at re-engaging the past were nevertheless identified as part of the “new thought tide” by Hu in an influential 1919 essay. Hu is careful to distance himself from “accommodationist” (*tiaohe*) views associated with conservatism, which hold that an agreeable compromise can be reached between old and new, as well as Chinese and Western, values (Hu, 1919: 131). However, his and similar efforts to re-organize the national heritage advance attitudes toward the past far more conciliatory than

those usually associated with May Fourth radicalism (Luo, 2000: 76). Most prominently, these approaches did not assume a rupture with the past so much as seek a different kind of continuity with it. Forster argues that calls by Fu and others to organize the national heritage, even when those tasks involved simply preserving materials for historical study, implied that the scholar resume the interrupted process of evolution: for Fu, this interruption and subsequent stagnation began in the Han dynasty, when scholars began trying to write in the language of the Zhou dynasty 800 years before and ignored the language and needs of their own context (Forster, 2014: 80–82). Rather than “follow the old” (*xun gu*), Fu argues, we must “reform the old” (*bian gu*) (Fu, 1980: 1052–1053), in a process that Fu explicitly identifies as continuing the Zhou-era practice of writing using the always-changing language of one’s times, directly and in a way unadorned by classical allusion (Fu, 1980: 1054–1057).

As Fu’s call indicates, part of the continuity sought by *New Tide* reorganizers involved situating themselves within existing, albeit often suppressed, lineages of indigenous scholarship, whose roots stretched back to well before the escalation of European encounters in the 19th century. In his 1923 inaugural essay for the periodical *National Studies* (*Guoxue jikan*), Hu Shi elaborates the accomplishments as well as shortcomings of Chinese scholarship since the Ming dynasty, arguing that ultimately “the scholars of today ought to continue what past scholars have begun” (Hu Shi, 1953: 5). Hu calls upon his readers to develop traditions of Qing empiricism that for him, as well as many New Culture radicals, denoted a native version of scientific inquiry, capable of bringing to heel an otherwise unsystematic Chinese textual tradition using a combination of philological reconstruction, text criticism, and historical comparisons. Such empiricism implied a strict historicism that demanded “clarity about the original context” of vaunted Confucian classics before determining their place within a history of thought, now broadened to include “the entirety of Chinese past culture and history”—in which nursery rhymes and folk operas were situated

alongside elite poetry and philosophical classics (Hu Shi, 1953: 6–7).

Although seemingly iconoclastic, this strict historicism was not seen by its adherents as deriving directly, or even mainly, from Western historiographical trends. Although Hu Shi was particularly influenced by John Dewey’s “genetic” reading of history—in which historical knowledge was necessary to make appropriate adjustments between existing morality and present conditions (Schneider, 1971: 53–56)—his own call to reorganize the national heritage, as well as his critique of the shortcomings of post-Ming Chinese historiography, draws foundational support from the work of marginalized iconoclasts Zhang Xuecheng (1731-1801 CE) and Zheng Qiao (1104-1162 CE). Among reorganizers, Gu Jiegang was particularly indebted to these earlier Chinese scholars in advancing his “doubting antiquity” school (*yigu pai*), because his classical education had not directly exposed him to any particular Western influence (Schneider, 1971: 21).⁸ As a result, despite his close friendship with Mao Zishui during his years at Beijing University (Richter, 1994: 359), Gu’s iconoclasm drew vital strength from the very “past thought and scholarship” Mao had deemed a festering corpse: Gu’s exposure at Beijing University to classicists such as Cui Shi and Zhang Taiyan fomented his growing interest in historical verification, building on the work of earlier Qing dynasty scholars including Liu Zhiji, Yao Jiheng, and Lu Yao, in addition to Zhang Xuecheng (Gu, 1984: 305–307; Richter, 1994: 360). According to Gu, these earlier critics had treated the classics as historical material rather than as sacred texts. Consequently, they recognized that “scholarship changes through time” (*xuewen yin shi yi*) and were able to produce objective historical analysis (Gu, 1984: 306). Contemporary work undertaken in the name of “science” (*kexue*) or the “national heritage,” Gu insists, thus integrates with existing trends of Chinese scholarship already going in the same direction (Gu, 1926, 1984: 307).

In emphasizing the role played by changing historical context in assessing the past, the

reorganization of the national heritage advances ultimately a different agenda than the reconnections urged by *National Heritage* writers. However, both approaches actively cultivate connections to the past for the purposes of transforming the present. Indeed, Hu and Gu explicitly saw their historical inquiry as informed by the same Qing dynasty empiricist scholarship that inspired Yu Shizhen. By using the past to transform and not merely inform the present, such “filiative activities” amplify the disciplinary capacities of the past without reducing its study to mere historicization. For advocates of “reorganizing the national heritage,” the belief in evolutionary development inspired a new look at the Chinese past that was also, in many ways, a deliberate and self-conscious continuation of past trends of critical scholarship. Although New Culture skeptics like Gu were not motivated, as their Qing predecessors were, by a concern “to recapture the ideas and intentions of the sage-kings of antiquity for implementation in the present” (Elman, 2001: vi), they nevertheless maintained a close and self-conscious relationship to the epistemological terms through which these earlier critics engaged the Chinese past. In following them to “conduct empirical research” (*kaozheng*) as a means of “seeking truth from facts” (*shi shi qiu shi*), reorganizers were able to deepen existing critiques of past elite representations of Chinese history. This included recognizing the significance played by a variety of typically marginalized groups and practices, such as folk traditions, non-canonical bodies of Chinese thought and practice, and non-Han contributions to Chinese civilization. Their “reorganization,” in addition to systematizing the received textual tradition, aimed to elevate these marginalized elements as serious subjects of a properly “Chinese” history that had formerly been dominated by elite Han literary traditions.

These links, far from endorsing the rupture between tradition and modernity long associated with New Culture intellectuals, rather affirmed that movement between past and present was, according to Gu Jiegang, a single holistic process. Gu elaborated on this point in

an essay written for a planned special issue of *New Tide* on “The Problems of Thought.”⁹ “The appearance of the new emerges by being drawn out by the old,” Gu explains; “you absolutely cannot arrive there by depending on nothing without a cause. Therefore I say that ‘moving from old to new’ is possible, but ‘changing old into new’ is impossible” (Gu, 1984: 302). Like Fu Sinian, Gu emphasized that the point of studying the past was to guide the present and future, rather than to reproduce past conditions. But in practice, for both Gu and Fu, this emphasis did not entail an unapologetic embrace of modernity. Rather, it demanded the extension into the present of terms and methods that enabled the critical historicism of past scholarship—which even meant following that scholarship to situate themselves as well as their objects of study within the historicized flow of “the trends of the times” (e.g., Gu, 1984: 305; Hu, 2003).

Lessons from the Past for the Present

The various positions in this debate help us to consider, with greater clarity, where and how uses of the Chinese past matter in modernity. They can be fruitfully read alongside the Confucian reconstructionist philosophy I examined earlier, which tends to obscure or ignore the extent to which their particular invocation of Confucian philosophy itself turns on a very particular kind of relationship to the past. Reading these two discourses together helps to reveal the stakes in using particular kinds of historical resources over others, including how past resources can be used to discipline the present rather than the opposite.

Approaches that posit a rupture with “tradition”—including contemporary reconstructions of Confucianism as well as New Culture iconoclasm—tend to hold the values of the present as constants, unduly narrowing the critical capacity of the past to shape present inquiry. Both approaches assume (rather than defend) the present age as an unproblematic and privileged standpoint from which to judge the value of past thought. For Mao Zishui, for

example, we study the past because it either acts as a delivery mechanism for a singular, specific present, *or* it shows where the present has gone wrong. It cannot inform present knowledge precisely because it is only through the present—that is, its material conditions as well as its values—that the past can be judged, and particular items selected from it as deserving greater scrutiny. For Mao and New Culture iconoclasts like him, the present itself lies beyond geographic or historical particularity (Luo, 2000: 60). Similarly, current Confucian reconstructionists offer not forthright confrontations with the vast amount of texts and practices that have historically constituted the Chinese past, but rather selective readings of the past advanced in the service of present values. The historical inaccuracy and intellectual narrowing these confrontations produce directly contradict their stated aims to offer a credible reconstruction of those actually-existing “Confucian ideals” (to use Chan’s term) supposed to have persisted throughout history. Ideas most amenable to discrete contrasts with that dominant discourse, such as the family values typified for modern Confucians in the “three bonds and five relationships,” receive attention out of proportion to their historical or textual significance, becoming emblems of a presumably distinctive Confucian worldview.¹⁰

At the same time, the classicist philology (*kaozheng*) that educated Chinese identified with *ruxue* or “Confucianism” since the 17th century, and which posed historical research as a moral exercise to reveal the ethical principles operative in the course of human and natural affairs, are systematically ignored as components of a possible Confucian philosophy in the modern present. Liang Qichao’s 1921 history of Qing scholarship, for example, identified dozens of schools of thought ranging over multiple geographic regions and comprising hundreds of distinct texts (Liang, 1985). Yet for the radical voices of May Fourth as well as more current reconstructionists, “Confucianism” becomes a protean term that glosses over such variations in geography, textuality, genre, and scholarly affiliation in favor of a

drastically reduced set of texts identified with the historical figure Confucius. The Chinese past is not only confined to a past era that by definition has no ongoing relationship to the present; its vast corpus of materials is also narrowed and flattened in the service of presentist values.

One consequence of this for the present age is that the hierarchical relationship between a dominant colonizing discourse and its “local” Chinese variant is not challenged but sustained, as reconstructionists continue to articulate the validity of Confucian ideas in terms shaped almost exclusively by modern European thought and experience. The supposition of rupture thus further deepens the marginalization of those bodies of thought and practice already reduced to, in the terminology of Fu Sinian, “materials” for historical organization rather than the “substance” of knowledge. For those thinkers who sought continuity with the past, however, there opens greater space for interrogating the dominance of European cultural and temporal knowledge. These engagements interrogate the very grounds of present intelligibility by recognizing diverse rather than singular continuities that bind present thought and action to ongoing “tracks” of evolution.

The instability, even erasure, of the Chinese past encourages scholars to investigate its lost “threads,” whether in the form of “organizing the national heritage” or by continuing Qing *xungu* and *kaoju* techniques, and to bind those threads up in new ways and for new purposes so as to “create” novelty rather than simply “revive the ancient” (*fugu*). Particularly for *National Heritage* writers, the very standpoint of a modern and therefore “Europeanized” (*Ouhua*) present, whose “needs” are meant to guide the adaptation of past thought, has instead become an unstable object of interpretation and transformative action. By characterizing past and present as entities that were mutually reliant on each other for their emergence and intelligibility, these writers effectively queried the privileged status of the present as both an object of study, and a vantage point from which to adjudicate value. Yu in

particular worries that the heritage of the past in its vastness will become lost; as a result, the present will lack means by which to clarify paths forward, and remain hostage to dominant powers to determine those paths. The point of studying and ordering the past, for Yu, is to resist those powers rather than fall prey to them, by showing diverse “tracks” of evolution that make new futures possible. On this basis, they argued instead for nurturing connections with the past—such as by maintaining use of literary rather than vernacular written Chinese—to illuminate the future paths that China in the world (and the world in China) might take.

My point is thus not to say that Angle, Chan or other contemporary Confucian interpreters are guilty of “inauthenticity.” Rather, I argue that recognizing contemporary Confucian reconstruction as a self-conscious use of the past—more specifically, of a globally-marginalized past whose terms of interpretation are typically dominated by Euro-American academic structures of knowledge-production—and not *only* as a purely philosophical enterprise enables more productive questions to be asked, as well as particular kinds of weaknesses or limitations to come into view. These questions and weaknesses, I have tried to show, are also of concern to Confucian reconstructionists and not only to historians, precisely because they dictate the terms through which Chinese thought can be taken seriously as a source of knowledge in our time and place. Nurturing continuity with such pasts via filiative practices, rather than assuming a rupture between tradition and modernity that must be sutured via a present reconstruction of some underlying transhistorical essence, undermines the certainty of present values without necessarily sacrificing their critical potential. An impulse toward continuity thus lays the ground for potentially more productive engagement with those “heritages” that have been marginalized by disciplinary histories in philosophy and political theory.

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¹ Those philosophies which try to use Confucianism to critique contemporary problems or institutions, typically liberalism, tend to do so in ways that reductively essentialize the tradition—such as attempts in the 1990s to formulate uniquely “Asian values” (discussed in Jenco, 2013) or more recent apologia for authoritarian rule (e.g., Bell, 2006).

² The next five paragraphs draw on my review of Angle’s book in (Jenco, 2015).

³ For this general critique of liberal pluralism, see (Mouffe, 2005; Seth, 2001)

⁴ This definition is reiterated by Hu Shi in his inaugural essay for the journal *National Studies* in 1923 (Hu Shi, 1953: 6).

⁵ My interpretation of *National Heritage* goals thus differs sharply from that of Shen Songqiao, who views these scholars as straddling the binary between “Eastern spiritualism” and “Western materialism” and therefore unable to overcome the constriction of “Chinese learning for substance, Western learning for use” (Shen, 1984: 26).

⁶ My term “filiative activities” adapts Laurence Schneider’s description of the goal of *National Studies* advocates to establish “filiation between past and present” (1971: 53).

⁷ The term “reorganizing the national heritage” was coined by Fu Sinian in his appended note to Mao Zishui’s article (Fu, 1919), and identified with Mao’s call for “the study of the national heritage” (*guogu xue*). Luo Zhitian offers further information about the sources of the term (2000: 80, fn. 2).

⁸ As Richter notes, “there existed in scholarly minds like his a genuine capability for disagreement with tradition (or with normative conventions of representing tradition) which needed no ‘Western impact’ to be aroused” (1994: 25).

⁹ Gu’s essay was published posthumously by Wang Xuhua in 1984 (Wang, 1984).

¹⁰ Indeed, the contemporary pervasion of these terms and their identification with “tradition” compels Yu Shizhen (Yu, 1919b: 2a) to single them out as evidence of a late-period forgery.

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