BROKEN CONTINUITY: SELF-CULTIVATION AND DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY NEO-CONFUCIANISM

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Ever since the end of the 19th century Chinese intellectuals have struggled with the problem of how to reconcile “self-cultivation,” a fundamental motive of Confucian philosophy, and the model of government related to it, with democratic politics. By looking at the interpretations of the Great Learning (Daxue 大學) given by the philosophers Xiong Shilin 梁實錫 (1886–1968) and Mou Zongsan 毛宗三 (1909–1995), I try to enter into the idea of democracization in contemporary Confucian thought, by taking into account the perspective of a disastrous tension between cultural continuity and a revolutionary break with the past in the process of Chinese modernization. Through Mou Zongsan’s distinction between the “way of politics” and the “way of governing,” I try to evaluate the contemporary significance of his political philosophy, and open up critical perspectives of comparative dialogue and transcultural hybridisation between contemporary Neo-Confucianism and critical theory, especially the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school.

I. Confucianism and Democracy

The fall of the Chinese Empire in 1911 and the ensuing establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) marked an unprecedented rupture in the political history of China. More than a hundred years later, the democratization of China is still a very controversial issue. The suppression of the democracy movement in June 1989 severely damaged the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the institutionalization of parliamentary democracy in the Republic of China on Taiwan effectively casts doubt on the need for one-party rule in China. The policy of the CCP thus appears, from a historical perspective and in spite of resolute anti-traditionalism and anti-Confucianism that has shaped the development of Chinese Marxism from the beginning, as a continuation of a tradition of Chinese despotism, which succeeded in surviving the revolutionary breakthroughs of the twentieth century.
Trends towards a legitimizing use of long-banned Confucianism by the CCP, as well as intellectual efforts toward reconciliation between Confucianism and so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” intensify the impression of the sinister continuity of an “imperial order,” which is said to have been supported by Confucian scholars since the Han period well up to the present. Insofar as this historical entanglement in the monarchic regime of imperial China is perceived as a kind of unavoidable fate of Confucianism, Confucian learning is excluded as a resource for critical reflection on the present. This perspective raises the question whether a historical break in the political history of modern China and structural changes, sought by Chinese intellectuals at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, have taken place at all; or whether, under the guise of the CCP’s radicalization of the revolution of 1911, the historical legacy of imperial despotism has only been carried on in the name of single-party dictatorship. If this question is answered in the affirmative also with regard to the anti-traditionalism of the Cultural Revolution, it would not be possible to speak of a rupture within the history of political despotism in China.1

After the forced modernization of China with its politically, economically, socially and culturally catastrophic and traumatic effects, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has, since 1989, entered a phase of development in which the CCP still does not tolerate questioning of its sole claim to power, but in which the enduring legitimacy crisis of Marxist ideology imposes reflection about the post-communist future of China. The bewildering complexity of its modernization process during the twentieth century blurs the possibility of any clear distinction between moments of continuity and moments of rupture. Political conceptions proposed by modern Confucianism, Chinese Marxism and Chinese liberalism have become mutually permeable to a degree that makes the philosophical analysis of China’s history of modernization since the nineteenth century, and the accompanying theoretical debates, gain critical and diagnostic significance.

1 See Liu Xiaobo (winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010), “Daifounding ‘wenhau da genning’ de fanxing” (Reflections on the negation of the “Cultural Revolution”), Zhongguo dangdai zhengzhi yu Zhongguo zhiyi fenzi (Politics in contemporary China and Chinese intellectuals), Taipei, Tangshen chubanshe, 1990. In this text, Liu also demonstrates uncompromising criticism of the “one party despotism” (yidang zwanchi - 一党专制) of the CCP. For him, internal power struggles over political directions are nothing but the continuation of a traditional political division of labour, between the imperial order and the Confucian tradition of “government by men” (renzhi 反而) which can only be overcome by a breakthrough to a democratic and constitutional multi-party system. Liu therefore claims that a liberal democracy in China has to counter the fateful alliance of Maoist Marxism and the Confucian heritage.


Heiner Roetzel has formulated considerations on the political philosophy of contemporary Neo-Confucianism as follows:

The Confucian virtues as a ferment for economy and as guarantors for the stability of authoritarian societies—is this the future potential of Chinese civilization? And is the only alternative the rejection of tradition and the adoption of the Western model? There is a third road already discussed by the nineteenth-century reformers, one of integration of tradition and progress. This road is anything but obsolete, and is probably the only one that can be taken, if China neither wants to perpetuate her traditional authority structures, nor to give up her cultural authenticity and suffer the same loss of identity as many societies of the Third World have witnessed after having been overruled by the West. China, above all because of her rich intellectual history, can spare herself such a fate. To achieve this goal, a nonregressive appropriation of tradition would be necessary which combines the interpretation and adaptation of the intellectual heritage with the modern demand of democracy and change. [...] What has to be reconstructed and regained is, therefore, the universalist potential of the old culture, which has ever since transcended the narrowness and injustice of the established forms of life and the simple worldview of most of China’s leaders.2

From this perspective I will reflect on the discussion of democratic politics (minzhu zhengzhi 民主政治) within contemporary Neo-Confucianism (dangdai xinruchang 當代新儒家). It is instructive because it has partly been shaped by the belief that democratic politics and the rule of law are to be understood as having originated in "the West" but, however, containing a universalist significance that has gained strong recognition in the writings of Confucian scholars. On the other hand, Confucian philosophy since the beginning of the twentieth century has also reflected the belief that radical westernization is doomed to fail and that it is not possible to simply impose upon China models of liberal democracy developed in Europe and North America. Confucian philosophers rather assume that democratic politics will only gain foothold in China if connected to the history of a Confucian moral philosophy, which has been the subject of systematic attempts toward normative reconstruction by contemporary Neo-Confucianism. This touches,
however, not merely the question of how to retrospectively justify the modern regime of democratic politics, by means of the "anamnestic" remembrance of historic-cultural resources. From the start, contemporary Neo-Confucianism expressed the self-confident conviction that the assimilation of democratic politics would not detract from the universal content of Confucianism but could, on the contrary, help to truly unfold it. There is thus the tendency to integrate the (Anglo-European) universalism of democratic politics and human rights into a (Chinese) universalism raised in the name of Confucianism. This confidence in the universalistic content of Confucian Learning (true 儒學) is difficult to understand and raises the question of how it can be theoretically justified.

It follows that Confucian-inspired discussions of "Western" democracy are by no means limited to the emphasis of Chinese or Asian values, but contain the potential for an open and comprehensive debate about the universality of democracy and human rights. "Intercultural discourse" on these issues, demanded also within the Frankfurt school Critical Theory, still remains stuck in its preliminary stage: this is due mainly to continuing ignorance of European philosophy concerning transcultural dynamics between East-Asia and Europe. Philosophy in Europe thus increasingly reveals the narrow-mindedness of (European) moral universalism. The following considerations try to go beyond philosophical Eurocentrism, which today seems to be synonymous with the impossibility of European intellectuals to consider global modernity, and the reinforcement of European self-provincializing: the self-confident universalism of freedom and democracy turns into alarmed calls for the defence of European ideals and values. The tendency toward provincializing Europe is manifested in the obvious difficulties of European intellectuals to thoroughly analyse the intellectual challenges Europe faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and to situate them within the context of global transformations. Intercultural discourse suffers first of all from the elementary ignorance in Europe of non-Western historical and theoretical developments. In the field of political philosophy, such efforts are immediately confronted with the difficulty to articulate debates within the Chinese-speaking world in a way that makes it possible to identify shared contemporary problems. In the final section of this paper I will try to give a preliminary outline of shared problems, which may allow us to further elaborate the theoretical constellation between contemporary Neo-Confucianism and Critical Theory.

II. The Model of the Great Learning

In the political philosophy of contemporary Neo-Confucianism it is generally acknowledged that the cultivation model of government, as developed in the Great Learning, is undergoing a major crisis in the process of Chinese modernization. However, both the explanation for the insufficient formation of democratic politics in imperial China, and the task of catching up in this respect, are time and again thought of in relation to this model. Its modern transformation is thus regarded as being a philosophical problem of major importance. Representatives of contemporary Neo-Confucianism like Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan have tried, in one way or another, to unfold the modern potential of this book—which was originally transmitted as a single chapter of the Book of Rites (Li Ji 禮記), later becoming part of the classical Four Books—and to reconceive this Confucian conception of government with the requirements of democratic politics. The following considerations start with the interpretation of the Great Learning proposed by Xiong Shili. In his commentary, "self-cultivation" (xiushen 修身) stands out within the eight stages outlined at the beginning of the Great Learning and encompasses the other seven stages. I will therefore speak of a cultivation model of government, in which self-cultivation is understood as a form of self-government intimately intertwined with the government of others in family, state and world. For Xiong Shili not only the government of self, but also the government of others is a form of cultivation which he therefore divides into two dimensions: inner cultivation (neixing 内性) and outer cultivation (waixing 外性). Inner cultivation is comprised of the "investigation of things" (gewu 物的), the "extension of knowledge" (zhishi 資知), "making thoughts sincere" (cheng yi 誠意), and the "rectification of the heart" (zhexin 正心). Outer cultivation consists of "regulating the family" (qijia 齊家), "governing the state" (zhi guo 治國), and "bringing peace to the world" (ping tianxia 平天下). For the two dimensions of cultivation he also uses the distinction, deriving from the book Zhuangzi (莊子), between "inner holiness" (neixing 内聖), the ideal of inner cultivation oriented toward self-

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6 A sino-philosophical expression of this tendency is François Jullien's L'invention de l'idéal et le destin de l'Europe, Paris, Seuil, 2009, especially the last chapter "L'idéal n'est pas épuisé."
perfection, and "outer kingliness" (waiwang 外王) which means ideal government in the world of human relations. ¹
to date, the relationship between the two dimensions is a very controversial topic in the Chinese-speaking academia. One focus of the debate is the idea of "opening up a new outer kingliness" (kaichu xin waiwang 開出新外王), and thus the possibility of reconciling Confucian philosophy and democratic politics through a modern reinterpretation of the Great Learning. Even within the Confucian camp, largely differing views exist. Lee Ming-huei 李明輝 (pinyin: Li Minghui), following his teacher Mou Zongsan, defends the need for an indirect connection between Confucian moral philosophy (inner holiness) and democracy (outer kingliness). However, the idea of "political Confucianism" as advocated by Jiang Qing 蒋慶, linking the traditional concept of the "kingly way" (wangdao 王道) to explicit rejection of democracy (seen as being China's surrender to the West), is for him a sort of "Confucian fundamentalism" trying to circumvent the modern transformation of Confucianism in an illusory way. Another focus of the debate is the Confucian camp on the Chinese book by historian Yu Ying-shih 余英時 entitled Zhu Xi’s Historical World. From a historical perspective, the book criticizes the moral metaphysics paradigmatically elaborated by Mou Zongsan, which, starting from the dimension of "inner holiness," attempts to unfold the motive of autonomous subjectivity for Confucian philosophy, with the aim of developing democratic politics within Confucianism.² Yu Ying-shih proposes the contrasting view that Confucianism should refrain from the universalist claim to influence the sphere of "outer kingliness" (that is, to exert influence on the level of the state and the world); it should no longer be understood as an all-encompassing theory but, on the contrary, confine itself to the sphere of private life within a liberal-democratic order.

For Mou Zongsan, the Confucian model of cultivation proposed by the Great Learning belongs to the context of a "virtue-oriented way of government": an ideal of government by morally-cultivated rulers and officials, which has dominated the Confucian understanding of politics throughout history. Has there, in the context of Confucian philosophy, ever developed a concept of politics or, more precisely, a concept of the political in the sense of a sphere concerned primarily with the legitimacy of political action? Many Chinese intellectuals of the twentieth century looked with great scepticism, if not with strong contempt, on the history of the strategic interdependence between monarchism and the Confucian way of "human politics" (renzeng 仁政), or of "government by men" (renzhì 人治) as opposed to the rule of law (fashi 法治). Confucian Learning is thus made responsible for the fact that a political alternative to monarchism was never seriously considered and, furthermore, that criticism remained stuck at the level of the moralistic dichotomy between good and evil rulers or upright and corrupt officials.³ Mou's reflections provide evidence for the strong awareness of the need to find, under changing historical conditions, a critical basis for the relationship between self-cultivation and democracy. Hence it is not surprising that his judgment about the traditional political culture of China is anything but flattering. Like influential European sinologists throughout the twentieth century, he doubts whether pre-modern China had ever systematically conceived an idea of politics that would have moved beyond the tension between refined forms of strategic action on the one hand and highly idealized claims to moral cultivation of emperors and officials on the other. Mou summarizes his doubts in the far-reaching statement that "the way of politics" had not been developed in traditional China (Zhongguo yiqian wu zhengdao 中國以前無政道), ⁴ and points out that in terms of "feudalism and

¹ I read here wangi 王 as a noun in the second tone. It can also be read as wang 张 in the fourth tone and then has the verbalized meaning of "governing in a (truly) kingly manner." By referring to the motive of cultivation it should be clear that neither "holiness" (often translated as "sagehood") nor "kingliness" are static conditions, but rather dynamic processes. Stephen C. Angle has attempted to examine the contemporary significance of the Confucian notion of holiness or sagehood. He refers primarily to discussions on "virtue ethics" in the context of Anglo-American and Chinese research. His research is guided by terms such as "progressive Confucianism" or "critical New Confucianism." See Stephen C. Angle, Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009; and Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism, Oxford, Oxford Polity Press, 2012.

² Cf. Lee Ming-huei, ""Neisha waiwang" wenti chuangtan" (Discussing once again the problem of "inner holiness and outer kingliness"), in Chou Ta-hsi (ed.), Li Fei, guanshi yan jing chaoshuang (Understanding, interpretation and the Confucian Tradition, volume: Perspectives), Taipei, Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 2009, p. 85-86.


⁵ See footnote 1.

aristocratic” or “monarchic and despotic” regimes it is basically impossible to develop a so-called “way of politics.” China thus remained in a state of pre-political government until becoming capable of developing a “way of politics” through the encounter with democratic politics developed in the West.

But what does “way of politics” mean? And to what extent does it differ from the “way of government” (zhidao 治道) that, according to Mou Zongsan, had reached in Confucianism, Taoism and Legism the highest level of self-reflexive or self-aware development (zuigao de zijue jingjie 最高的自覺境界)? Perhaps a short reminder of the break within the European image of China in the eighteenth century makes it easier to understand this distinction. From admiration of moral government by a virtuous emperor and cultivated literati officials, without faith in God as its foundation, the image turned to that of backward despotism, as opposed to progress toward democratic politics and constitutional legitimacy based on the protection of human rights. The cultivation of rulers promoted by Confucian scholars increasingly appeared to be intertwined with the old regime of enlightened absolutism, which still largely believed in the moralization of rulers and their methods of government as a way out of the political crisis of monarchism, but was unable to accomplish the breakthrough to the institutionalization of human rights, democratic mechanisms of government change and the separation of powers. When speaking about “the way of politics,” Mou Zongsan has in mind its modern development, which in Europe developed the previous distinction between different forms of government. The eighteenth-century discourse on the backwardness of imperial China in general, and the political philosophy of Confucianism in particular, still largely dominates historical interpretations of authoritarian tendencies in post-imperial China.

From this perspective, Mou Zongsan’s conception of a modern political philosophy pervaded by Confucian convictions is irritating. First of all, his reflections mercilessly reveal the weaknesses of a Confucian model of government based on broadening processes of cultivation and moralization. In wide-ranging historical considerations, Mou ponders, again and again, on the question why the transition from the way of governing to the way of politics, and thus the philosophical foundation of democracy, did not take place in China—although he sees already in ancient China approaches to the institutionalization of peaceful government change. At no point does he doubt the historical need to justify this transition philosophically and promote it politically. He is convinced, however, that this transition can only be completed if the model of government outlined in the Great Learning is taken into full consideration: not in the sense of a direct renaissance of traditional political culture, but in that of a broken continuity that allows its advantages to be included into a Confucian conception of democracy, and thus makes the reconciliation between the way of politics and the way of governing, democracy and self-cultivation, possible.

This possibility is of course confronted with an obstacle I have already mentioned: the cultivation model of government seems to have been involved in the imperial order of traditional China to such an extent that every intention to disentangle Confucianism from it is immediately exposed to the critique of wishful thinking or even of ideology. It is no doubt much easier to speak about the ideological risks and theoretical pitfalls associated with the modern transformation of the Great Learning, than to attempt to find a language that makes this text fruitful for contemporary political philosophy in a critical way. Nevertheless, Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan both made this kind of attempt.

III. The Modern Transformation of Confucian Self-Cultivation

Concerning the dimension of “outer cultivation” (or outer kingliness), Xiong Shili sharply criticizes an understanding of the three levels of family regulation, state government and world peace, which limits them to “princes and chancellors” alone: for him the dimension of outer cultivation lies in its entirety within the responsibility of all “citizens” (guomin 國民). For Xiong such a view takes the formulation of the Great Learning seriously, according to which self-cultivation, “from the Son of Heaven down to the ordinary people” (shumin 庶民), is the “root” of communal life. He counters older conceptions, which tended to keep the “ordinary people” out of the spheres of state and world, with the pathetic verdict that this position in fact equals the demise of “sacred learning” (shengxue 國學), that is, Confucian Learning and the extinction of the “humane way.”

Xiong is obviously striving to provide a conceptual framework of “inner holiness—outer kingliness” which defends the model of cultivation proposed by the Great Learning but, simultaneously, exposes it to a democratizing transformation, through which he intends to overcome its monarchist...
confinement. Xiong tries, in other words, to unfold the normative truth-content of Confucian cultivation and to reconstruct the Great Learning in a way which moves beyond the limits of historical and cultural conditions, by which he now explains the narrow-mindedness of many pre-modern commentaries. Thereby he basically enacts a critical reconstruction of the classical text by way of historicizing its truth-content, thus transcending, in an astonishing gesture of liberation, the suffocating restrictions of traditional interpretations.

This understanding of Xiong Shili’s encounter with the Great Learning makes it also possible to historically situate his interpretation and to understand why his disciple Mou Zongsan tried to push the creative transformation of Confucian political philosophy even further. Xiong’s interpretation of the Confucian doctrine of the “holy person” (shengren 聖人) obviously suffers from the restriction to recognize the need for democratization only in the sphere of external kinglyness— he is convinced that a “new outer kinglyness” (xin waiwang 新外王) can be accomplished as a direct extension of the understanding of inner holiness established by Neo-Confucian philosophers during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. That is, in a way that would avoid any painful rupture with the pre-modern model of external kinglyness: he still considered it sufficient to overcome the limitation of outer cultivation to an elite of rulers and scholar-officials by undertaking an egalitarian expansion, which then would set free the universal content of the Great Learning.

Mou Zongsan’s philosophical reflection on the relationship between the two dimensions of cultivation, between “inner holiness” and “outer kinglyness,” unmistakably goes beyond Xiong Shili’s transformative efforts. Mou clearly sees the difficulty with the intention to let the new outer kinglyness emerge from inner holiness directly, and rather believes that the emphasis on the moment of “counter-transformation” (nizhuan 逆轉), which he considers to have been of core importance in the Neo-Confucian understanding of “inner holiness,” constitutes a condition of possibility in any attempt to philosophically approach the idea of a new outer kinglyness.14 In the possibility to generate the dimension of outer kinglyness with that crucial moment of reflexive counter-transformation, which comprises critical self-reflection and the corresponding ascetic work of the self on the self (gongfu 工夫), Mou sees the chance, on the one hand, to break with the political tradition of imperial China, and, on the other hand, to further develop the model of Confucian self-cultivation proposed in the Great Learning, by translating it into a modern subjectivity, which in turn would be able to realize democratic politics supported by and transformed through an encounter with Confucian Learning.

The notion of subjectivity thus becomes an important focus of further discussions about the relationship between democracy and self-cultivation in contemporary Neo-Confucianism. Mou’s normative reconstruction of philosophical Confucianism takes its start at this point and, therefore, any critical examination of contemporary Neo-Confucianism has to take this notion into account. Mou Zongsan was strongly convinced that an “idealistic” understanding of moral and autonomous subjectivity alone could help China to truly grasp the metaphysical or even religious foundation of modern democracy and science.15 In my point of view, this “idealistic” understanding does not deny the significance of ascetic work of the self on the self for the constitution of subjectivity, but Mou correlates it with primordial moral creativity which, following the Neo-Confucian framework of “essence and use” (ti yong 體用), is awarded metaphysical priority.16

This conviction has led Mou Zongsan and other representatives of contemporary Neo-Confucianism to far-reaching emphasis on the idealistic “heart-mind” school (xinxue 心學), not only setting the tone for the reconstruction of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism but, furthermore, leading to emphasis on the religiousness of Confucianism, which has strongly influenced later generations of Confucian scholars like Liu Shu-hsien 劉述先, Tsui Meei Ming 丁維明 and Lee Ming-huei 李明輝. The assumption that the autonomous subject that underlies Kantian moral philosophy is already contained in the idea of “original heart” (benxin 本心) traced back to the philosopher Mencius (370–290 BC) led Mou to the theoretically far-reaching consequence that his transformation of the classical cultivation-model of government is once again largely restricted to “outer kinglyness,” and to the constitution of a historical correspondence between the dimension of “inner holiness” and modern internal subjectivity (the lack of which Hegel states in his remarks on China in the lectures on the history of philosophy).17

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15 Cf. Billoud, Thinking Through Confucian Modernity..., op. cit., chapter 1 (“Setting the Ground for a True Autonomy of the Moral Subject”).


17 In his criticism of Tsui Meei Ming, Heiner Roetzel has noted that Tu, on the one hand, rejects Western individualism that neglects the constitutive role of social relationships but, on the
Mou Zongsan, the continuity between “the learning of heart-(mind) and nature” (xin xing zhi xue 心性之學) established by Neo-Confucianism and modern moral subjectivity is so evident and direct that, in this respect, a break with tradition or an effort of critical transformation, which he thinks is needed for the dimension of “outer holiness,” is not considered necessary. At this point he remains close to his teacher Xiong Shili. In his interpretation of the phrase “illustrate illustrious virtue” (ming ming de 明明德) from the Great Learning, Xiong refers to Wang Yangming and his ontological understanding of “illustrious virtue” as “original heart” which shall be “illuminated” by the way of ascetic work (gongfu 工夫) of the self on the self. Mou seems to remain close to Xiong’s interpretation of the Great Learning as far as his understanding of “inner holiness” is concerned but, of course, elaborates it towards a more complex theory of subjectivity which is based on his critical encounter with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Furthermore, in respect to the relationship between inner holiness and outer holiness he critically goes beyond Xiong’s interpretation by emphasizing the need for a broken continuity justified through the notion of counter-transformation.

But is this modern transformation of Confucian learning convincing and sustainable? Certainly, doubts are hard to avoid. Jean François Billeter, for example, has expressed his respect toward the work of Mou Zongsan, but is convinced that it “is doomed to remain sterile.” 18 He shares the assumption that Mou’s reconstruction of the history of Chinese thought is centred around a “certain idea of wisdom (sagesse) or, more precisely, holiness (sainteté).” His criticism can be summarized as follows: Mou Zongsan, and with him contemporary Neo-Confucianism, remain (1) hopelessly entangled within the “imperial despotism” of pre-modern “Chinese civilization.” 19 Mou’s attempt to reconcile Confucian learning and democracy is based (2) on a metaphysical idea of “holiness” that can be debunked by modern criticism as futile Schwärmerei and is, therefore, doomed to failure. 20 I have the other hand, represents an understanding of subjectivity that remains close to a philosophy of consciousness, and grounds subjectivity in an unbroken moral and religious inwardness. In contrast, Reoetz proposes an intersubjective transformation of the modern principle of subjectivity, which tries to draw on the theories of Jürgen Habermas and George Herbert Mead for the development of modern Confucianism. Cf. Heinrich Reoetz, “Confucianism between Tradition and Modernity, Religion, and Secularization: Questions to Tu Weiming.” Dao, no 7, 2008, p. 376-379.

In the wider context of modern Confucianism there are voices who declare that Mou Zongsan has paid too much attention to subjectivity. If the meaning of this kind of criticism is that Mou’s understanding of the constellation between inner cultivation and idealistic subjectivity is problematic and requires further development, it touches an important point. If it wants to express, however, that Confucianism, due to its supposedly more collec-

impression that many defenders and representatives of contemporary Neo-
Confucianism do not meet this kind of criticism (which is expressed, in a similar manner, both from other Western sinologists and within the Chinese-speaking academia) with due seriousness. They find it very difficult to understand to what extent Mou’s concept of “inner holiness” and especially his defence of “intellectual intuition,” which is a result of his critical reflections on Kant, is an unacceptable provocation for modern critical philosophy. There seems to be little self-consciousness among Chinese-speaking intellectuals for the allergic reactions this philosophical approach often provokes. However, I am convinced that deepened encounter and patient research in this field is not only bitterly needed but can be philosophically fruitful. 21 Despite the sketchiness of my previous discussion, it has hopefully become clear why I think that a change of perspective is both possible and necessary. Against Billetter and others, the counter-hypothesis is the following: if this change of perspective gradually takes shape, the critical and transcultural potential of contemporary neo-Confucianism will emerge. To unfold this potential will be especially crucial for the formation of a critical theory of self-cultivation. 22

IV. Ethical Life and Democracy

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19 Ibid., p. 84.
20 Billeter (ibid., p. 85-86) writes on the idea of “holiness” (sainteté): “Cette idée, qui est déjà centrale dans le néoconfucianisme, me paraît profondément tributaire de l’ideologie impérialiste, car les actes parfaits que le saint est censé accomplir ne sont pas le fait du Saint, mais s’inscrivent dans une réalité qui le dépasse et qui agit à travers lui. Ce n’est pas lui qui agit. […] Sa pensée révèle l’une des faiblesses majeures du confucianisme en général, qui prétend à l’homme ce qu’il doit être, mais ne lui dit rien sur ce qu’il est, sur sa faiblesse, sur le mal. Sa constante référence à Kant repose en outre sur de graves malentendus. […] Sans doute Kant aurait-il considéré la ‘sainteté’ selon Mou Tsong-san [Mou Zongsan] comme une dou-
teuse rêverie philosophique, comme un cas de savante Schwärmerei.”
tivist and anti-individualistic basic orientation, is ultimately not compatible with Mou’s attempt to modernize Confucianism, I perceive this as a problematic development which falls behind the critical standards already established by his normative reconstruction of Neo-Confucianism. But it is hard to deny that such a development fits all too well into the way in which institutions for so-called national studies (guoxue 国学) have been recently re-established at many Chinese universities. The rehabilitation of classical Chinese culture is often permeated by an obsessive pathos of national self-assertion on the one hand and massive attempts toward commercialisation on the other. This trend corresponds very well with a prevailing mix of authoritarianism and cultural nationalism, which may have very negative consequences for the development of modern Confucianism in the long run: “a complete destruction of Confucian values, which the anti-traditionalism initiated by the May Fourth Movement actually had never accomplished.”23

Certainly, Mou Zongsan would have perceived the emerging return to traditional culture on the Chinese mainland not without satisfaction, because the political-economic rise of China into a modern world power can be understood as evidence for his anti-Hegelian conviction that Europe by no means marks the final stage of a world history developing from the Orient to the Occident; but that history will rather, in a further dialectical twist and through the assimilation of European and American modernity, return to her starting point: namely, to China.24 Entirely inconsistent with Mou’s theory is, however, the historical one-sidedness of cultural and nationalist self-consciousness, which is characterized by anti-Western, anti-modern, anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic rhetoric, and testifies for a strong desire to finally reverse the traumatic intrusion of Western modernity into China and restore the interrupted continuity with so-called Chinese tradition.

Viewed from the anti-modern perspective of historical continuity, the distinction between tradition and modernity appears as an annoying relic of an era of national weakness that needs to be overcome and, finally, erased from historical memory. This overcoming of modernity is supposed to be most successful, if the rupture between tradition and modernity is interpreted as a kind of misfortune, which has befallen China from the outside more or less like a natural disaster. If it were possible to somehow under-


24 Mou Zongsan, Lishi cheque (Philosophy of History), in Mou Zongsan xiansheng quanjji, op. cit., vol. 9, p. 73.

stand modernity in China as a kind of inevitable violence that caused tremendous devastation but whose traces will, sooner or later, fade away in the process of economic, political and cultural resurgence, then it would also be possible to somehow reverse the influence of many modern concepts, which have been assimilated into the Chinese language in order to articulate the modern order of things, and to return to categories of knowledge that were common in China prior to the reception of Western culture. In a Chinese language consistently purified from “foreign words” there would be no place for neologisms such as “philosophy,” “subjectivity” or “democracy” introduced into modern Chinese since the nineteenth century. This is the anti-modern illusion of a culturalistic purism whose profound disgust toward all forms of cultural hybridization is shared by influential intellectuals not only in China but also by philosophers and sinologists in Europe, who constantly try to delegitimize the use of these categories in contemporary Chinese thought.

François Jullien, for example, largely ignores the entanglement of his philosophical approach toward Chinese thought with culturalistic purism. He has, in my opinion, not yet found a convincing way out of the false alternative between sterile universalism and culturalistic relativism. He expresses the following criticism of the use of “Western” categories in contemporary Chinese thought: “Today, if one reads a text of classical Chinese literature re-written, that is restructured in contemporary Chinese which has been reformatted through European categories, it offers only a pale reflection of Western cultural expectations: although written in Chinese, it is a sterilized and disappointing text that has been passed like through a sieve through this categorical uniformization.”25 To this uniformization and sterilization of cultural resources then responds a discourse on “Chineseness” and “national studies” that tends to block the game of nationalist renewal within the limits of parochial identities and seemingly unchanging traditions.26 Undoubtedly, China’s modernization has produced very destructive intellectual consequences and can be described today as leading to the uniformization and sterilization of cultural and historical resources. But it can also be described as a process of re-categorization and creative transformation. By reducing the re-categorization of Chinese thought (that is, thought in the Chinese language, sino-grammatic thought to be more precise), with which several generations of twentieth-century intellectuals have

26 Ibid., p. 256-257.
been struggling, to a process of “categorical uniformization,” Jullien actually joins a “discourse on Chineseness” whose racist undertones—the keyword mentioned by Jullien is “cultural blood relationship”—by no means remained hidden to him. As I see it, the only way out of this troubling complicity between European Sinology and Chinese national studies can be the proof that the work of recategorizing Chinese thought during the twentieth century is by no means tantamount to categorical uniformization and cultural sterilization, but rather has opened fruitful and fascinating possibilities that still await further development.

In light of these considerations, Mou Zongsan’s insistent discussion of philosophy, subjectivity and democracy gains a critical importance that deserves special attention. Despite his repeated invocations of the spirit of Chinese culture, that he ardently wanted to keep alive in the inevitable process of modernization, philosophy, subjectivity and democracy mark a conscious break with the tradition. Facing the modern philosophy of subjectivity, Mou sees himself compelled to engage in a “self-negation” of a—however imagined—identity and integrity of Chinese culture, without which the “spirit of Chinese culture” would not have been able to come to a modern self-awareness. This raises the question of how radical Mou has thought about this moment of self-negation with regard to life and survival of Chinese culture. Did Kant and Hegel, in the end, merely serve as strategic instruments to establish a “Confucian modernity,” which in its “heart” remained Chinese and Confucian but thus failed to become truly modern and universalistic? Such an interpretation underestimates, in my view, the universalistic impulse of contemporary Neo-Confucianism.

In the writings of Mou Zongsan, discussions of Kant’s notion of moral autonomy and Hegel’s philosophy of history serve as an important starting point for his critical reflection of Confucian learning. The reference to Hegel’s philosophy of history informs his reconstruction of Confucian political philosophy, while Kant deeply influences his research on epistemological issues and moral philosophy. These two moments, however, represent different stages in his theoretical development: his main works concerning political philosophy and the philosophy of history were written in the 1950s, while the systematic reconstruction of Confucian moral philosophy constituted the centre of his work from the 1960s onwards. As a consequence, in his major works on moral philosophy his ideas concerning political philosophy have never regained the presence they once had. Instead, his theory of “moral metaphysics”, developed in the course of his critical encounter with Kant, gave his interpretation of Confucian learning a rather non-political and a-historical outlook. Although Mou never entirely lost sight of the social and political implications of his moral philosophy, the interconnection of these two moments of development lagged far behind the possibilities associated with it. Consequently, his attempt to relate a theory of democratic politics and a philosophy of cultivation by interpreting the Great Learning was not really systematically unfolded. Instead of seeing a fruitful tension in the philosophical relationship between Kant and Hegel, Mou inclines very heavily to the side of Kantian moral autonomy, whose abstract formalism he seeks to overcome by a conception of “intellectual intuition” into which he integrates the Confucian ideal of the holy person—his interpretation of Kant thus amounts to a peculiar interpretation of the classical Confucian doctrine of “inner holiness.”

The relationship between morality and ethical life (which is the usual but unsatisfactory translation of the German notion of Sittlichkeit), brought into play by Hegel in his critique of Kant, never won systematic significance for Mou Zongsan’s discussion of the relationship between the “way of politics” and the “way of government.” It could have gained significance because, for Mou, the traditional Confucian “way of government” is very closely intertwined with processes of cultivation and education, which go beyond the dimension of the moral (inner) cultivation of the subject into the direction of an outer cultivation, which comprises the stages of family, state and world. The spheres of ethical life, constituted by family, state and world, are therefore inseparable from the Confucian ideas of “government by virtue” (dezhì 德治), of “government by rites” (li zhì 禮治) or of “government by man” (renzhì 人治). In The Way of Politics and the Way of Government Mou is par-

27 François Jullien, op. cit., p. 256.

30 The tension between morality and ethical life, between Kant and Hegel, is an important reference point in Heiner Roetzel’s reconstruction of classical Confucian ethics. See Heiner Roetz, The Chinese Ethics of the Axial Age, op. cit., p. 72. Lee Ming-huei sees a correspondence between morality and ethical life, on the one hand and “inner holiness” and “external kinglyness” on the other. Thus it becomes possible, at least preliminarily, to situate the model of cultivation and government proposed in the Great Learning within a philosophical problem of major contemporary significance. See Lee Ming-huei, “Neisheng waiwang” wenti chongtian,” op. cit., p. 84.
particularly interested in those aspects of "government by rites," in which he sees the dormant potential for a constitutional "government by law" (fazhi 法治). He is interested in the transition from "inner cultivation" to autonomous morality and in the transition from authoritarian rites to democratic laws or rights.

What is neglected in his discussion is the problem of "democratic rites" or, to use a term recently developed by Axel Honneth, the task of a "democratic ethical life" (demokratische Sittlichkeit).\(^{31}\) To date, modern Confucianism, especially on the Chinese mainland, suffers time and again from the combination of political authoritarianism and "conventional ethical life" (konventionelle Sittlichkeit)—in this way Heiner Roetz has translated and interpreted the Confucian concept of rites (li 礼), opposing it to the concept of "humanity" (ren 仁) in which he perceives a tendency toward post-conventional as well as post-traditional thinking and autonomous morality within Confucianism.\(^{32}\) Following Honneth's interpretation of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, it becomes clear, however, that the opposition of post-conventional morality and conventional ethical life is highly unsatisfactory in the realm of democratic theory, since democracy cannot be based on formal law and autonomous morality only, but rather has to be embedded in forms of "democratic ethical life" exercised and rooted in everyday practice.

This seems to be a perspective that corresponds very well with the tendency towards the democratization of "outer cultivation" (outer kingship), which is remarkably expressed in Xiong Shili's and Mou Zongsan's interpretation of the Great Learning. Both have tried to liberate Confucian philosophy of cultivation from its authoritarian character. They may have been only partly successful, but nevertheless paved the way for a "non-regressive appropriation of tradition."\(^{33}\) In the face of a false reconciliation between the political authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party and conventional ethical life associated with Confucianism, it is especially important to remember the critical potential Confucian philosophy has accumulated in the twentieth century.\(^{34}\)

In the context of contemporary Chinese politics, the strong emphasis on "subjectivity" continues to undermine the authoritarian enslavement of Confucian learning. Mou's philosophy of subjectivity (or, in Confucian terms, philosophy of cultivation) formed by prolonged interchange, especially with Kant, is probably still not outdated in its transcultural significance; namely, its unwillingness to submit itself to the authoritarian regime of cultural nationalism, which is the common denominator for the rapprochement between the Communist Party and modern Confucianism. The difficult and complex relationship between Mou Zongsan's philosophy and the Confucian tradition, which culminates in a call for the counter-transformation of Confucian thought, remains a critical theme in the flesh of this regressive appropriation of tradition.

In addition, from the perspective of the development of a philosophical constellation between contemporary Neo-Confucianism and Critical Theory, the significance of this counter-transformation can hardly be underestimated, because Mou's reference to Kant and Hegel opens up a methodologically reflective orientation within contemporary Chinese philosophy and which, especially from a European perspective, still very difficult to establish. Moreover, the way of an encounter with contemporary Chinese philosophy becomes possible to gain access to a cultural and historical archive, which has been extensively reconstructed by Chinese scholars who invented a modern Chinese language largely intermingled with "foreign words." This whole area of modern Chinese philosophy can thereby gradually become accessible.

\(^{31}\) Already in the book Kampf um Anerkennung (English translation: Struggle for recognition) Honneth proposes a "post-traditional, democratic idea of ethical life" (Honneth, Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 280-281); in Leiden an Unbestimmtheit (English version: Suffering from Indeterminacy) he relates ethical life and freedom in a way that further tries to guard his reactualization of falling into the trap of Hegel's anti-democratic conservatism (cf. Honneth, Leiden an Unbestimmtheit: Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, Stuttgart, Reclam, 2001, p. 78-127; in Das Recht auf Freiheit: Grundzüge einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2011, the relation between democratic ethical life and subjective freedom has become the central concern of his reflections on Hegel's philosophy of right. I suppose that this perspective is important for the modern reconstruction of the Confucian notion of rites because it provides arguments for the idea that rites without subjectivity and freedom will remain stuck in pre-modern traditionism.

\(^{32}\) See Heiner Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age, op. cit., chapter 5. Roetz has sharpened the difference between post-conventional morality and conventional ethical life (Sittlichkeit) especially through the critical encounter with Anglo-American interpretations of Confucianism proposed by Herben Fingarette, Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. In their aesthetizing interpretation of the Confucian concept of "rites" he perceives an idealization of conventional ethical life. Honneth's "reactualization" of the Hegelian philosophy of right, however, can be seen as wide-ranging criticism of the reduction of Hegel's concept of ethical life to obedience toward social conventions, which contradicts the constitutive meaning of freedom in Hegel's philosophy. Accordingly Honneth undertakes the reconstruction of ethical life in the name of "social freedom." See Honneth, Das Recht der Freiheit, op. cit., part C.

for critical assessment and discussion. Last but not least, against the backdrop of thinking about further political reforms within the regime dominated by the Communist Party and attempts to imagine a post-communist China, the critical discussion of various perspectives which have been developed in the course of China’s modernization gains importance, especially those perspectives that have been discarded and suppressed in the PRC since 1949. The writings of those Confucian philosophers who fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1949 thus do not represent nostalgic positions that are historically outdated, but possibilities that are crucial for the critical orientation in the (Chinese) present.

However, Mou Zongsan’s call for “democratic politics,” accompanied by fervent anti-communist resentment, cannot be taken into account without reflection on the crisis of democracy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Democratic politics has become problematic, so much that it is no longer possible to take convenient refuge in the easy contrast between the democratic West and the despotic East, which leads contemporary European thinkers, over and over again, to self-congratulatory belief in the normative superiority of Europe over China. Therefore, the discussion about the political future of China cannot simply assume the political regime in Europe and North America as a normative standard. These regimes struggle with the problem of democratic politics, endangered by the undermining influence neoliberal regimes of governance exert on them. European intellectuals broadly discuss the question whether and to what extent the recent development of the European Union leads to a gradual departure from democratic politics (keywords: post-democracy, post-liberalism, post-politics).

With regard to political developments in contemporary China, the question thus has to be raised whether China has undergone a transition from a pre-political regime (according to Mou Zongsan, China did not develop a “way of politics”) to a post-political one. Has there developed, under the surface of so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics, a combination of neoliberal capitalism and technocratic bureaucracy, corresponding to the subversion of democratic politics in Europe in an intriguing way that is still not sufficiently understood? The future of democratic politics therefore appears as a shared transcultural problem without ready-made solutions either in Europe or in China. This forces “us” to a transcultural problematization of democratic politics, which has, in the context of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, taken the form of a critical reconstitution of the cultivation model of government paradigmatically unfolded in the Great Learning.
LECTURES ET USAGES DE LA GRANDE ÉTUDE

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