

***The Rebirth of the Moral Self—The Second Generation of Modern Confucians and their Modernization Discourses***

Jana S. Rošker. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Téa SERNELJ\*

The author of the present book, Prof. Jana S. Rošker, is Professor of Sinology at the Department of Asian Studies at Ljubljana University. She is an expert in Chinese epistemology, mostly dealing with the fields of Chinese logic and epistemology. In her new book, however, she devoted her research to a topic, linked to modern Chinese, especially Taiwanese philosophy. In this book, she introduces, analyses and interprets the crucial works of the so-called second generation of the Contemporary New Confucian movement, which she prefers to denote as Modern Confucian stream of thought, in order to highlight its tight connection with their aspirations to modernize traditional Chinese philosophy and to harmonize it with the ideational and material demands of the modern era.

The book consists of eight chapters, including a rather extensive and very informative introduction, a conclusion and three annexes, including a Chronological chart of Chinese dynasties, a Chronology of the developmental phases of Confucianism and an Index of technical terms and proper names in Chinese.

In the Introduction (Chapter one), the author underscores some fundamental methodological problems of intercultural research.

Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of the specific features of Chinese modernization, using as its analytical template the so-called “crisis of rationality” (Habermas) which appears in societies split between actual, contemporary socio-economic and political practices and inherited but outmoded ideological assumptions. In this regard, it then describes the origins of the Modern Confucian

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current which emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a crucial historical moment when the Chinese confrontation with the Western powers produced a series of intellectual controversies on modernization, understood as a period of transformation and separation from traditional political, economic and axiological paradigms that had hitherto dominated the social reality of the Chinese empire.

The next chapter deals with the general historical, social and theoretical conditions which contributed to forming the Modern Confucian stream of thought, and examines its theoretical foundations.

In the fourth chapter, the author introduces four key philosophers of the so-called 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Modern Confucian thought, Mou Zongsan, Fang Dongmei, Xu Fuguan and Tang Junyi. It points out the fact that “Confucian modernization” was a fundamental question for all these theoreticians. The chapter is divided into 4 sections, one for each thinker, with a brief biographical account and a description of their philosophical theories that focuses on their attempts to synthesize Western and traditional Chinese thought.

By appropriating certain theoretical concepts and approaches derived from Western philosophy (especially German idealism) these thinkers showed their awareness that not only traditional Chinese, but also Western philosophy was in crisis. Modern Confucian researches were thus not limited to revitalizing or rehabilitating their own cultural or traditional ideals, but recognized that conceptual and methodological renewal had to also deal with certain ideas “imported” from those cultures where modernization had first occurred. The endeavors of these thinkers were thus not focused solely upon the rescue of their own tradition, but also upon a foreign intellectual tradition which had quite clearly created its own philosophical dead-ends and binds.

A second factor uniting these thinkers is the conviction that morality must play a central role in the solution of the modern world crisis. Their theories were thus not only the fruit of technical, organizational or contractual factors, but also arose out of a profound awareness of the importance of the ethical conditionality of human life. A further common ground can also be found in the supposition that every human being as a moral being (*ens morale*) has a potential for maintaining and constantly re-formulating their moral priorities, and that this potential represents a foundation for a modernity of solidarity. This potential, which is linked to the concepts of autonomy as well as individual and social responsibility, is clearly evident in their different individual reconstructions of Confucian ethics.

The chapter also shows how the 2nd generation of Confucians generally elaborated or upgraded pre-existing theoretical attempts to revitalize the Chinese cultural identity by “transplanting the old roots” of their own tradition. They believed that this renewal of “roots” not only helped guarantee the survival of Chinese culture, but also offered an active and innovative role for Modern Confucian discourses in the framework of modernized Chinese thought, and within the context of international dialogues among different modern societies.

Generally speaking, the representatives of the 2nd generation of Modern Confucians believed that if China wished to undertake an independent modernization while still preserving its cultural identity, it had to strengthen and develop those elements in its own tradition that had the potential of producing science and democracy. In order to delineate the main elements in this theoretical reworking of the Chinese—and especially Confucian—tradition, the fifth chapter is divided into four sections, each of which analyzes a specific issue and describes how that issue is elaborated by each member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Modern Confucianism. However, irrespective of their common viewpoints, the author stresses how the each scholar had very different ideas on how to actually bring about such a Confucian democracy.

Another element shared by all Modern Confucians is a general skepticism towards “Western models of science and democracy”. Singled out as especially negative is the exaggerated normative nature of these society, and the prevalence of a mechanistic rationality and non-reflective scientism which risks excluding the fundamental principles of social ethics.

The next chapter deals with the Modern Confucian attempts to identify, transform and develop certain crucial concepts essential for any modernization process, while remaining within the framework of the Chinese tradition. Since it has generally been assumed that the Western concepts of reason/rationality and subject/subjectivity are paradigms indispensable for modernization, the Modern Confucian philosophers of the 2nd generation mostly focused on reinterpreting certain traditional Chinese concepts that could—in a modernized and extended form—likewise serve as theoretical paradigms for the development of modern societies (e.g. 性, 心, 本心, 理, 性理, 情理, 內聖外王, 良知, 道心 etc.). Such concepts were elaborated, extended and modified by the Modern Confucians in order to formulate new notions that could serve as the conceptual foundations for theories of a specifically Chinese modernization (e.g. the concepts of 性體, 道德

本心, 理性, 自我坎陷, 智的直覺, 心的本體, 無限的智心, 新內聖外王, 道德主體, 道德自我, 道德理性, etc.).

The chapter is divided into five sections, each focusing on a specific issue. The first section deals with the specific methodological approach necessary for understanding the concepts in question, i.e. the paradigm of immanent transcendence, while the next three sections explore specific traditional concepts that, in the view of the Modern Confucians, could serve as theoretical foundations for a specific Chinese modernization model. The final section examines the Modern Confucian critique of the inconsistency of Western, especially European elaborations of the aforementioned modernization concepts.

Chapter seven elaborates the modernized forms of the concepts, treated in the previous chapter and indicates their relevance for a conception of “Chinese” modernization theories. An important notion here is the advanced concept of the traditional moral Self, which in the new global philosophies was intended to assume the function of a “truly” autonomous subject. “True” autonomy in fact means that this subject is both particular and universal. While this subject acts as an individual, necessarily forming a part of the social community, it is also ennobled by an infinite heart-mind which enables it to be aware of its unity with the cosmos. Through its free will, it derives its freedom from its own inborn moral imperative which is likewise infinite, although its infinite nature is not defined by the existence of God, but rather by the organic, structural unity with all metaphysical and physical elements of being. This new, moral and infinite, limitless subject represents an elaboration of the “traditional” Confucian concept of the moral Self, and thus may also be the active personality that can sustain the idea of modernization. Since its reason as a tool of intuitive, concrete bodily comprehension is limitless, it is not dependent upon (any kind of) spiritual connection between the world and itself. This moral subject or Self is truly autonomous, for its autonomy is not determined by anything external to itself.

In the framework of classical (and partly also Modern) Confucianism, this Self is autonomous precisely due to its rational, structural (*li* 理) connection with all aspects of its natural and social environment. And because this connection is also dynamic and organic, it is capable of infinite forms of communication and cooperation. For a Chinese model of modernity, i.e. for a modernity permeated with humanism or mutuality (*ren* 仁), these forms of communication and

cooperation are much more important than formal laws of economy and official politics.

The final chapter provides an overview of the complex image of the Modern Confucian movement in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and evaluates its function and the significance of its intellectual contributions for the development of Chinese culture in the era of modernization and globalization.

It also affirms the importance of the continued, future development of this important current, and of realizing its assumptions not only on a theoretical, but also on a practical, concrete level within society.

This book raises awareness of the significance of the Modern Confucian stream of thought and exposes that Confucianism is not a monolithic entity in the Chinese and East Asian area, but differs in regard to its ideational and political background. Furthermore, the author wants to express the dynamic and creative ability of Confucian thought. The book is thus of great importance in understanding classical and Modern Confucian thought, although it simultaneously points to the new paths of further investigations, necessary in this field of research.