Review of Makeham - New Confucianism

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At the heart of *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* is a question of definition: How should we understand the contested notion of “New Confucianism”? Is it a matter of genealogy, philosophical doctrine, political orientation, or personal experience? Does it matter in what terms individuals identified themselves or whether they saw themselves as part of a shared intellectual movement? Who, ultimately, gets to answer these questions? Of course there is much more in the essays than these questions — including, most notably, astute analyses of several philosophers’ ideas, thought-provoking reflection on some of the roles played by Buddhism in modern Chinese thought, and historical/sociological scholarship on the invention of tradition. I will turn to these matters later. I start with definitions both because they are necessary for understanding much of the rest, and because it is here that I find some of the most interesting ground for critical engagement with the volume’s authors.

A summary of the essays will help to make clear the centrality of the definition of “New Confucianism.” The volume opens with John Makeham’s Introduction and his two essays, “The Restrospective Creation of New Confucianism” and “The New Daotong.” The former essay argues that there was no “group identity” of “New Confucians” prior to the 1970s; the latter looks at the ways that thinkers like Mou Zongsan used the notion of *daotong* — “the interconnecting thread of the way” — as a strategy of orthodoxy-formation. Next comes Song Xianlin’s article on the political and cultural reasons for the rise of discussion of “New Confucianism” in the PRC during the 1980s. Rounding out the two essays in Part II is “Li Zehou
and New Confucianism” by Sylvia Chan, which argues that Li ought to be seen as a New
Confucian despite his many differences with figures more canonically associated with the
movement. Part III contains two essays, the first of which is N. Serina Chan’s excellent, and self-
explanatory, “What is Confucian and New about the Thought of Mou Zongsan?” This is paired
with an essay by Lauren Pfister that argues against labeling Feng Youlan as
a New Confucian, though not for the reasons (alleged flaws in his personal character) that some critics have
asserted. The volume closes with two articles on earlier figures, Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili.
John Hanafin argues vigorously that the former should be understood as Buddhist, not
Confucian; Ng Yu-kwan praises the latter’s foundational role in New Confucianism and surveys
some key points in Xiong’s metaphysical theory. All together, this is clearly a high-quality and
wide-ranging collection.

“New Confucianism” is a translation of “dangdai xin rujia” and several variations thereto
[1]. Broadly speaking, the volume reveals two very different ways of thinking about what “New
Confucianism” is. Some authors, and some of the philosophers and scholars about whom they
write, take New Confucianism to be a specific line of intellectual orthodoxy or a school of
thought determined as much by genealogical relations as by philosophical content. Makeham
explains that one way this commitment to genealogy is rationalized is through reference to the
spiritual legacy of Xiong Shili (1885-1968). Makeham cites Liu Shuxian, understood by many to
be a contemporary leader of the New Confucian movement, as follows: “One may say that Mr.
Xiong initiated a spirit; it was this spirit that Tang, Mou, and others fastened on to” [59]; and
“That which is transmitted by overseas, Hong Kong, and Taiwan New Confucians is definitely
not the system of Mr. Xiong’s [thought], but rather his spirit” [Ibid]. A similar attitude can be
detected in Ng Yu-kwan’s essay in the volume, wherein he writes that “Xiong Shili … was the first Confucian after Wang Yangming to inherit and promote moral spirituality in general, and moral metaphysics in particular” [219]. “Inheritance” is a key concept in this framework, and allows enormous flexibility to those who would define New Confucianism in a given way. Just as financial inheritance often follows genealogical lines, but need not always do so, spiritual inheritance tends to follow teacher-disciple lines, but need not. It can thus be difficult to know how to argue against a claim (or denial) of spiritual inheritance, nor is it always clear how to adjudicate competing claims. As Makeham’s essay on the “new daotong” makes clear, though, such disputes can often be perceived as having high stakes.

A radically different way of thinking about New Confucianism can be found in Sylvia Chan’s contribution. She points out that Confucianism is not a homogeneous body of teachings, and concludes that “the spirit of tolerance of diversity is characteristic of the Confucian school. New Confucianism, if it is true to the Confucian tradition, should not be dogmatic or sectarian, but should be broad enough to accommodate and creatively transform all the trends either already in the Confucian canon, or which can be adopted to harmonize with Confucian teachings” [106]. This might be compared to Makeham’s own view, namely: “Rather than thinking of New Confucianism as being a single line of intellectual orthodoxy, or even a complex intellectual movement comprising many threads of thought, I would prefer to think in terms of twentieth-century Confucian or Confucian-inspired philosophies that embrace a variety of forms of intellectual expression. To privilege New Confucianism seems unjustified” [44].
Now there are issues that we might raise about both Chan’s and Makeham’s formulations. Chan’s claim about tolerance as a characteristic of “the Confucian school” does not follow from the presence of diversity within the tradition; indeed, part of the interest of Makeham’s article on *daotong* is the way it allows is to see a traditional mechanism of self-definition and exclusion at work. It is nonetheless true that many Confucians have tried to accommodate and transform, as she urges. Of course, transforming is a critical, creative, and synthetic process with which others might differ, but that is just to say that Chan is not advocating being all things to all people: as can be seen in the arguments of her subject, Li Zehou, Chan’s vision of Confucianism has philosophical teeth.

To get at the issue I want to raise with Makeham’s vision of New Confucianism, ask yourself: What does he mean by “To privilege New Confucianism seems unjustified”? He has just said that he thinks “New Confucianism” should be understood as “twentieth-century Confucian...philosophy.” Is it this which should not be privileged? Or, more likely, does he mean that the New Confucianism-as-intellectual-orthodoxy should not be privileged — that is, the “school” defined by Mou or Liu should not be privileged? The confusion arises, I think, from Makeham’s ambiguous feelings about the label “New Confucian.” One can read his essays in this volume and come away with the impression that there really is no justification for the claim (by Mou, Liu, or whomever) that a single, coherent school of thought called New Confucianism has ever existed. Alternatively, one can read Makeham as saying that there is something called New Confucianism, though it is not exactly what some of its proponents think it is. Thus: “It is only with the advent [in the 1980s] of this ‘third generation’ that we can speak of New Confucianism as having cohesion and self-identity, thus making the ‘third’ generation the first
real generation of new Confucians” [43]. I would argue, though, that Makeham has not demonstrated much cohesion, nor agreement on self-identity, among the individuals variously identified as making up the “third generation.” In light of all the problems with narrower definitions of New Confucian than Chan’s, why does Makeham seem so resistant?

The clearest answer comes when Makeham considers three definitions of New Confucian proposed by Yu Yingshi. According to the first, anyone who researches Confucian learning counts. According to the second, only those who “have contributed new philosophical interpretations and developments to Confucian learning” count. The third, finally, includes only those “who belong to Xiong Shili’s ‘school’.” Based on what we have seen, we might wonder why Makeham does not simply embrace the second definition, which is essentially similar to Chan’s. His reason is that “the problem with this second definition is that it still begs the question of how to distinguish New Confucianism from Confucianism in the twentieth century” [38-9]. Fair enough, but why is such a distinction important? The lesson of both Makeham’s essays and of the collection as a whole might well be that unless one is prepared to accept an unfalsifiable criterion like “inheritance of Xiong Shili’s spirit,” no consistent distinction is forthcoming.

Let me turn from definitions to highlighting some other themes that emerge from reading the essays. One important issue is the relevance to New Confucianism, however defined, of multiple centers and multiple philosophical traditions. New Confucians are fundamentally in dialogue with texts and traditions from Indian and Chinese Buddhism, and from German, French, and Anglo-American philosophy. Marxism is important to those engaged with New
Confucianism in the PRC, whether as scholar and critic (here see especially pp. 95-6 of Song’s essay) or as participant. Tu Weiming has emphasized that “the possibility of Confucianism having a third period of development will be determined by whether it can respond creatively to the challenges of Western culture” [quoted on p. 42]; here it is important to note that Tu’s “third period” includes all Confucians in the twentieth century and beyond, as well as to say that all the figures covered in this volume one way or another have sought to meet Tu’s challenge.

It is worth dwelling briefly on the multifaceted relation these essays reveal between New Confucianism and Buddhism. The essays on Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, and Mou Zongsan all discuss at length their subjects’ use of Buddhist concepts and methodologies. In each case, we also see that the philosophers had some criticism for Buddhism, although one — Liang Shuming — insisted that he personally was nonetheless a Buddhist. I have nothing but praise for the clarity with which each author elucidates the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine from a variety of schools and traditions: this is an important contribution to the understanding of each man’s thought. Only one author spends much time on the question of “was he Buddhist or Confucian?”: partly in reaction to Alitto’s well-known characterization of Liang as “The Last Confucian,” Hanafin is determined to show that Liang was in fact a Buddhist. I must say that I found this aspect of his essay less interesting, and less convincing, than the excellent discussion of Liang’s ideas themselves. Hanafin notes that most of Liang’s comments on Buddhism and Confucianism give us “seemingly confusing and mixed messages” [193-4]. Hanafin is not to blame for being unable to offer a satisfying resolution to the confusion, but the confusion is only exacerbated by attempting to insist that there really is a single answer (viz., that he is Buddhist).
A final theme worth exploring is the future of New Confucianism. This future can be thought about within at least two frameworks. One the one hand, what does the future hold for New Confucianism as philosophy and/or as philosophical movement? On the other hand, what might the future popular role of New Confucianism be? The fact that this latter question is raised at all serves to highlight some of the ways in which, for all the volume’s appropriate stress on New Confucianism as philosophical movement, New Confucianism is nonetheless different from neo-Aristotelianism or neo-Kantiansm. For some proponents, at least, it will not be successful unless it can reach beyond academic discussion and exert broad influence on “modern and East Asian peoples” [72]. Proponents of “Boston Confucianism” might set their goal higher still, hoping for substantial Confucian impact on public conversations outside of East Asia. None of the essays in the volume could be described as optimistic about the public future of New Confucianism, though they vary in their prognoses. Makeham writes, for instance, that “If there is to be a future for a socially relevant Confucianism, it surely cannot ignore the small but growing lobby of those in China and Taiwan who have been calling for ‘secularized’ and grass-roots forms of Confucianism” [72]. In contrast, Song concludes his essay by noting that the cultural critic Ge Hongbing has charged that intellectuals who have rediscovered Confucianism are “like spiritual vagrants who, having lost their own cultural identity at the time of disintegration of discursive power, sought new clothes from all sorts of ‘isms’ to empower themselves in discourse. Their experiments with New Confucianism … are acts of desperation” [100]. Song does not explicitly endorse Ge’s accusation, but lets it stand as a challenge, adding that all the discussion of New Confucianism has done little to revive a “humanistic spirit” in China.
The sorts of cultural transformation at which New Confucianism might aim are different, of course, in Taiwan, China, Singapore, Boston, and so on. But all look to be difficult goals. Two more modest goals that New Confucians — on anyone’s definition — can set for themselves are continued, critical engagement with the Confucian philosophical tradition, and broadening, creative participation in global philosophical dialogue. Both of these have been goals of the New Confucians (again, according to any definition) throughout the twentieth century, and major figures have made significant contributions to both. We should hope and expect that future New Confucians will continue this trend, and thank the contributors to this valuable collection for their part in facilitating further engagement and further dialogue.

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