Review of John Makeham: Lost Soul—“Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse

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There is little doubt that the wounds inflicted upon the body of traditional Confucianism by the end of China’s civil service exams in 1905, the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, and the New Culture Movement that began in 1915 collectively proved fatal. With its body dead or dying, Confucians since the early twentieth century have been struggling to find a new body of practice that can host what the eminent historian Yu Ying-shih has referred to as Confucianism’s wandering soul. John Makeham’s Lost Soul: “Confucianism” in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse is an impressive investigation of these efforts over the last thirty years. Lost Soul is a natural follow-up to the work Makeham has previously done on the twentieth-century “New Confucian” movement, and takes the story of the fate of Confucianism all the way up to 2005. Makeham offers no final pronouncement on the prognosis for Confucianism, suggesting that readers can form their own opinions on how adequately the academic, discursive “body” he describes has succeeded in hosting the wandering soul’s return. However, it is clear that Makeham is at least somewhat skeptical since he argues that contemporary Confucian academic discourse is neither broadly connected to moral practice nor is it robustly creative in philosophical terms. His book is thus not only a valuable perspective on what has been happening under the banner of “Confucianism” in recent years, but also a trenchant challenge that his subjects would do well to take most seriously.
The subject of the book is “Confucian learning” (ruxue 儒学), which refers to Confucianism primarily as it is embodied in the activities and writing of academics in China and Taiwan, though Makeham also spends time on recent discussion of “Confucian teaching” (rujiao 儒教) and its relation to religion. Lost Soul is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Historical Background,” covers events in the 1980s and early 1990s. Makeham stresses the role of Tu Wei-ming and the impact of efforts to promote Confucian education in Singapore. Even though the institution-building efforts in which Tu participated were ultimately abandoned, they provided a platform for the idea that a “creatively transformed” Confucianism could have renewed relevance in the contemporary world. Another theme is the important role played by mainland scholar Fang Ke-li. Fang, a Marxist, led important research projects on ruxue — and more specifically on New Confucianism — starting in 1986. Makeham covers the background, motivation, and some of the content of this research. It is in this context that he first introduces his argument that the revival of ruxue in China is not, to any significant degree, the result of a conscious government policy to promote Confucianism as an alternative ideology. Finally, Makeham also looks in some detail at activities in Taiwan, both because of their intrinsic importance and because he observes that rivalry and (more positively) cross-fertilization between scholars on both sides of the Taiwan Straits has played a crucial role in developing and sustaining academic interest in ruxue.

Part 2 is organized around the theme of ruxue and Chinese culture. Makeham begins exploring the degree to which ruxue has been understood as the core of Chinese culture, with special reference to the wide-spread view that ruxue has “thoroughly penetrated every dimension and stratum of traditional society and its institutions” [p. 111]. For such a broad influence to be even conceivable, one suspects that “ruxue” would have to be referring to more than one thing,
and indeed, part of Makeham’s purpose here is to show the various dimensions or aspects of *ruxue* that scholars have distinguished. He suggests that these dimensions are typically defined in dyadic terms: politicized versus popular, institutional versus social, official versus unofficial, and so on. In most cases, one dimension is seen as good and worth developing, while the other is problematic and in need of critique or outright rejection. For many analysts, the multidimensional nature of *ruxue* — and its close tie to “Chinese culture” — enables it to live on into the twentieth century, even after its traditional “body” has died. For example, Makeham cites Chen Lai’s argument that Confucian (*rujia* 儒家) ethics continued in the Nationalist period and even into the Communist era [p. 116]. Another influential approach is that of Li Zehou, who argues that *ruxue* is “sedimented” into Chinese people’s psychological being: it forms the “deep structure” of their thinking [p. 119]. Makeham argues that we can see particular ways in which the equation of *ruxue* and Chinese culture play out by looking at two prominent mainland academics, Guo Qiyong and Zheng Jiadong. Guo emphasizes the importance of “personally experiencing the historical significance and modern value of *ruxue*” [p. 134]. One of the important ideas suggested by this phrase is the particular value of *ruxue* ideals, independent of Marxist theories of philosophy and history. Chinese would do well, he is suggesting, to recognize and recover the values of their culture. At the same time, Guo sees the need for philosophy, *ruxue*, and Chinese culture to evolve. “Promoting the concept of *zhong* 忠 [loyalty] does not necessarily imply that one must be loyal to some political authority. This is because *zhong* can be given a modern meaning” [p. 136]. A major theme that Makeham draws from Zheng Jiadong is the problematic narrowing of *ruxue* that has come from its intellectualization and professionlization in the twentieth century. Zheng understands the reasons this has happened, but worries about the consequences of cleaving “knowledge” from “moral action” — and only
emphasizing the former [p. 142]. A final aspect of Part 2 is Makeham’s investigation of the idea of *daotong*: 道統, which he translates as “interconnecting thread of the way.” Competing articulations of the *daotong*, typically via competing genealogies, have been used since the Song dynasty to legitimize certain visions of *ruxue* — and certain individuals — over others. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this chapter concerns the question of whether it is still possible to be “an internal participant in *rujia* culture” [p. 157]. As Makeham reads him, Yu Ying-shih has argued that this is not possible. Although Makeham finds faults in the arguments of those who seek to rebut Yu, he teases out of the debate the clear commitment on all sides to the necessity of a tight relationship between *ruxue* and Chinese culture.

In Part 3, Makeham considers the vexed relations between *ruxue* and orthodoxy. He begins by patiently endeavoring to explicate the views of Taiwanese philosopher Lin Anwu, who criticizes what he calls “Imperial-style” *ruxue* in two guises: the ideology of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and the thought of Mou Zongsan, whose views have set the paradigms for much subsequent academic work on *ruxue*. Some readers may wonder at the attention Makeham devotes to Lin’s ideas, especially because in the end Makeham seems to agree with Lin’s critics that it is not at all clear “just what [Lin’s] Post-New Confucianism is or intends to be” [p 185]. In light of Makeham’s quite critical final conclusion concerning the lack of philosophical creativity within contemporary *ruxue*, however, his efforts here to charitably interpret Lin’s thinking are appropriate and commendable. The second topic within Part 3 is political orthodoxy. He pointedly contrasts the attitudes of certain mainland scholars with their Taiwanese contemporaries toward the efforts, up through the 1980s, by the Taiwanese government to use Confucianism as a kind of state ideology. On the one hand, mainland scholar Chen Ming has gone so far as to endorse a “new authoritarianism” as part of his effort to secure state patronage.
for a broad *ruxue* (and *rujiao*, on which see below) revival. In contrast, Taiwanese academics like Huang Junjie and Lin Anwu have been highly critical of just the same Taiwanese government-sponsored programs that Chen endorses, viewing the programs as blatantly manipulating *ruxue* ideals for the government’s own political ends [p. 198]. Makeham understands the desire on the part of Chen Ming and others to secure state patronage. His sympathies nonetheless lie with the Taiwanese critics, though he has a telling criticism for them as well: “Precisely because [the Taiwanese] *ruxue* revivalists hold such strong views on [ruxue as the essence of Chinese culture], they have been unable to escape the unwanted but inevitable lingering associations with former GMD policies in which culture was deployed for the purpose of defining a particular sort of political identity” [p. 207]. Another sort of orthodoxy with which Makeham deals is the academic orthodoxy imposed consciously or unconsciously by senior scholars and teachers. Where earlier in the twentieth century this was in terms of “doubting antiquity,” Makeham illustrates the current dominance of an “explaining antiquity” paradigm which leads scholars to leap to unsupported conclusions in a race to fill in gaps in understanding of the early history of *ruxue*. He examines and critiques a range of influential arguments that have been used to “reaffirm traditional accounts of early *ru* intellectual history” [p. 230]. Finally, Makeham ends Part 3 with an examination of the interaction between *ruxue* and Marxism. He looks at various slogans and approaches that have been suggested: “abstract inheritance,” “critical transcendence,” “synthetic creation,” and so on. As throughout the book, he considers both institution-building and academic activities, as well as specific books and essays in which these ideas are elaborated. His general conclusion is that while talk of synthesis between Marxism and *ruxue* — and the broad conviction that *ruxue* is central to Chinese culture —
helped to open up some discursive space for the advocacy of *ruxue*, the theoretical contents of the proposals for “synthetic creation” did not run very deep.

Part 4 is titled “Distinguishing *Rujiao* and Propogating *Ruxue,***” and is concerned with efforts move *ruxue* beyond the confines of philosophy or of academia entirely. One chapter is devoted to various efforts to demarcate a purportedly religious “*rujiao* 儒教” from a more secular “*rujia* 儒家” (both of which are standardly translated as “Confucianism”). Makeham ascertains that there is little consensus on the use of these terms, and furthermore argues that their prescriptive rather than descriptive use “often thwarts a reliable purchase on historical realities” [p. 309]. His own understanding of “religion in the modern sense” — “in which belief is privileged over practice, is assumed to be present in all cultures, and takes Christianity as its exemplar” [p. 278] — strikes me as an old-fashioned view unlikely to be accepted by contemporary scholars of religion in the US, although this does capture something of what Chinese scholars are debating about when they argue that *rujiao* is, or isn’t, religion. Another chapter in Part Four is concerned with Jiang Qing’s efforts to revive a *ruxue* rooted in concrete institutions. Makeham details Jiang’s worries about a “crisis of belief” in China and the threat of China becoming a “Christian country” [pp. 262, 275]. Makeham succinctly and charitably summarizes Jiang’s proposals and broader vision. His assessment is two-fold. On the one hand, he writes that “it is difficult not to be sympathetic to [Taiwanese scholar] Li Minghui’s criticism of Jiang…for advancing a utopian vision that is tantamount to a return to the middle ages” [p. 275]. On the other hand, he notes that Jiang has garnered support from a small but growing number of scholars and even from within the Department of Education, so it is possible that Jiang’s proposals will at least stimulate further debate in the years to come. Makeham ends this section of the book with a look at disparate efforts to promote “traditional values,” the reading of
classic texts, and a personality ideal modeled on ruxue. A major theme of this chapter is that examination of the relevant state documents does not show any explicit ties to ruxue; again and again, he shows that these popularizing projects are undertaken by individuals and institutions both inside and outside academia, but without significant state endorsement of ruxue. Admittedly, there are indirect relationships. For example, official concern with the lack of ethical scruples among China’s burgeoning legions of entrepreneurs has spurred interest among non-governmental bodies in the ideal of the “ru entrepreneur (rushang 儒商)” [p. 325]. Nonetheless, Makeham does not detect any acceleration of state interest in promoting activities linked to ruxue.

This rapid summary of a complex book has no doubt missed some important points, and has done no more than hint at the vast range of sources — virtually all of them in Chinese — on which Makeham bases his arguments. Let me nonetheless turn now to some engagement with the book’s arguments. Makeham summarizes his theses as follows:

First, the process of intellectual cross-fertilization and rivalry between scholars in China and overseas Chinese scholars (particularly in Taiwan) has served to sustain academic interest in ruxue. Second, contrary to conventional wisdom, party-state support in the PRC does not underpin the continuing academic discourse on ruxue. Third, cultural nationalism rather than state nationalism better explains the nature of this activity. Fourth, academic discourse on ruxue provides little evidence of robust philosophical creativity. (Pp. 6-7)

All these theses are interesting and on each count Makeham provides detailed evidence and is, in my judgment, substantially correct. We should be careful not to misinterpret the first of these claims, which elsewhere in the book is phrased in a slightly more circumspect fashion: cross-fertilization and rivalry is “a key impetus” sustaining the activities he studies in the book [p. 331]. Furthermore, it is worth noting the difference between “rivalry” and “cross-fertilization.” Makeham shows that rivalry played a role, but he himself notes that it would be “misleading to characterize [the major research projects he discusses] as having been dominated by cross-straits
rivalry” [p. 333]. Cross-fertilization is a different kind of process that requires independent sorts of motivation, such as being stimulated by encountering different views or by the challenge of articulating one’s own view in a different context.

Makeham’s discussion of cultural nationalism, as versus state nationalism or outright party-state support, is subtle, well-documented, and convincing. It is concern with ideas like nation, culture, and Chinese identity, rather than a concern with the Chinese state (or party-state), that has helped to undergird the focus on ruxue we have been discussing. We should take note of one of Makeham’s own qualifications, however. He cites a contemporary theorist of nationalism as arguing that because cultural nationalism is “often unable to extend beyond the educated strata, [it] is forced to adopt state-oriented strategies by which to institutionalize its ideals in the social order” [p. 343]. Even though Makeham seems correct that the degree to which ruxue activities have been co-opted by state interests is still quite limited, this dynamic bears our close attention in the years ahead. At the same time, we should be careful not to see all cultural nationalist motivations as undermined by their reliance on an overly-broad conception of culture. It is true, as Makeham (following Thomas Metzger) notes, that a monolithic idea of “Chinese culture” has figured importantly (and problematically) in many of the arguments he has discussed [p. 339]. I hold no brief for those who insist that a single “Chinese culture” must remain intact and rooted in traditional Confucian views if a Chinese nation is to subsist, rather than be annihilated by Christianity or the West. Nonetheless I would argue that a concern for finding value in one’s “own” traditions and heritage is a critical and legitimate motive for looking again at these traditions, even if by doing so in a new context that is also open to foreign traditions, one all but guarantees that the local traditions will be significantly changed in the process.
I suspect that Makeham agrees with me on this last point, yet would respond that insofar as the sort of dynamic I have just described were actually taking place, we should have witnessed more philosophical creativity. It is thus primarily in his fourth thesis that Makeham moves beyond mere description and throws down his gauntlet. As I said at the outset, Makeham’s book represents a significant challenge to contemporary scholars of *ruxue*: if he is right that there has been a lack of philosophical creativity, why is that? Is philosophical creativity even important? If it is, are there signs that it might emerge in the near future? I will take these questions in order. First, for the most part Makeham is right to say that *ruxue* scholarship over the last two or three decades exhibits little philosophical creativity. I believe that there has been somewhat more creativity in the work at a Marxist-Confucian synthesis than Makeham credits [p. 246], and that discussion of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” and related themes have not been as sterile as Makeham claims [p. 86]; see, for example, He Xinquan 何信全, *Confucianism and Modern Democracy* 儒學與現代民主 (Taipei, 1996), or Li Minghui 李明輝, *Political Thought in Confucian Perspective* 儒家視野下的政治思想 (Beijing, 2005). Still, Makeham’s general conclusion is correct. What are the reasons for this? We can glean three types of explanations from Makeham’s account. First is the emphasis, until comparatively recently, on simplistic Marxist frameworks and methodologies in the PRC; to this we can also add the lack of thorough historical and linguistic training. Over the entire period of Makeham’s study, though, these problems are being solved. Second is the degree to which the paradigms of *ruxue* scholarship — including graduate education, dissertation topics, and criteria for professional success more generally — have not stressed creativity. Referring specifically to studies of New Confucianism in Taiwan, Makeham puts this point very strongly: “The significance of these sorts of papers…is the performative role they play in initiating younger scholars into the ritual norms prescribed by
a broader community of scholars. Creativity is not a criterion for acceptance; incantation of
ritually privileged phrases and theme is” [p. 86]. I worry that Makeham is here overstatement an
aspect that would be found in any instance of Kuhnian “normal science,” but surely we can at
least agree with him that the norms within a given realm of scholarship aim at enforcing a degree
of concern with common vocabulary and problems.

The third reason for the lack of creativity is the one to which I feel we should pay the
most attention. Philosophical creativity is sparked by an openness to ideas and critiques from
outside of one’s own tradition. This is as true of the history of Confucianism as it is of any
Western tradition of thought: simply consider the development of Confucianism during the
Warring States era (stimulated by Mohism, Daoism, etc.), the Song Dynasty (stimulated by
Buddhism and Daoism), and the twentieth century (stimulated by German thought, etc.).
Although Makeham does not thematize this issue as much as he might have, it is still clear from
his account that a lack of cross-tradition openness and dialogue at least partly explains the lack of
philosophical creativity he describes. He cites a former CASS scholar as follows: “Those who
work on Chinese philosophy can completely ignore the overall spirit and contemporary
development of Western philosophy, while those who work on Western philosophy can
disregard the core patterns of China’s indigenous thought and its philosophical traditions” [p.
147]. As this quote makes clear, the problem is not confined to ruxue scholars. Neither is it
confined to China; as Makeham notes in passing [p. 139 n. 18], Western philosophers have not
evinced much interest in “dialogue” with Chinese traditions. Another side of this issue is that
where we can find creativity, there is often a cross-traditional openness at its core. Among the
philosophers Makeham treats in the book, Li Zehou comes across as the most constructively
creative, and there seems little doubt that his efforts at crossing traditions helps to explain this.
Even if we end up agreeing with Makeham that Lin Anwu has not yet delivered on his intriguing slogans, we can still see something promising in what Makeham describes as Lin’s “overture to Marxism” [p. 186].

The reasons for the lack of openness, mutual understanding, and dialogue are many; overcoming them will be key to the future of ruxue as a philosophical movement. Admittedly, some adherents of ruxue might not bemoan the demise of ruxue’s philosophical ambitions. Certain voices in the recent debate over the “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” have suggested that to view ruxue as “zhexue 哲學” — the neologism coined to translated “philosophy” — is to capitulate to a Western ordering of the intellectual and cultural world, and to abandon ruxue’s traditional claims to offer a system of values and practices that is much broader than academic philosophy. Other voices, though, have argued both that ruxue must adapt to a world that is radically different from Imperial China, and that one can simultaneously view contemporary ruxue as “philosophy” and in other, perhaps broader ways. Confucian learning played many different roles in earlier times; there is no reason that it cannot do so today. If ruxue is develop as philosophy, though, its students and scholars will have to open themselves to constructive engagement with philosophers from other traditions. Indeed, there are some recent signs that a process of mutual opening and mutual challenge is beginning, with Chinese and Western philosophers starting to collaborate on conferences and book projects that consciously cross traditions. As Makeham knows full well, the writing of very recent history is a dicey business. Will the three decades he has canvassed eventually be seen as having laid the groundwork for a new flourishing of Confucian philosophy, or as a quixotic last gasp of a dying tradition? From our current vantage point, it is impossible to predict with any confidence what fate lies in store for Confucianism’s lost soul.