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Replacing Liberal Confucianism with Progressive Confucianism

Stephen C. Angle*

Abstract

The core thesis of this essay is that "progressive Confucianism" is a clear and viable category, a label for many though not all contemporary Confucians, which succeeds in capturing what is useful about so-called "liberal" Confucianism without suffering from various problems to which I show "liberal Confucianism" falls prey. The essay begins with examples of progressive Confucians being labeled as "liberal" in ways that are misleading. I next turn to the use of "liberal" by influential twentieth-century New Confucians and then look at some contemporary theorists who are often labeled "liberal Confucians." Overall, for reasons having to do both with content and with rhetoric, I argue that even some Confucians who have been content to be called "liberal Confucians" should resist this label and identify as progressive Confucians instead, although others with "dual-commitments" may still prefer "liberal Confucian" or even "Confucian liberal." The essay concludes with some further clarification of the senses in which progressive Confucians use the idea of "progress."

Keywords: progressive Confucianism, liberal Confucianism, progress, liberalism, *ziyou* 自由, Mou Zongsan, Qiu Feng, Huang Yushun, Bao Wenxin

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We live in unsettled yet exciting times for Confucian thinkers. Confucianism faces many challenges but at the same time is experiencing a broad revival. The value of Confucianism is widely debated in China, while interest around the world in Confucianism is growing. In this context we philosophers have a responsibility to be as clear as we can be about the different approaches to Confucianism that have been proposed. Both scholars and practitioners today see Confucianism from various perspectives, such as history, philosophy, religion, and culture; some see it as capable of new growth, while others seek to return to its past. In addition, thinkers also argue about the relations between contemporary Confucianism and Western philosophies like Marxism, liberalism, Kantianism, conservativism, and republicanism. Should Confucianism engage with these schools of thought? Are the resulting changes to Confucianism positive adaptations to a shared modernity, or are they negative results of Western cultural hegemony?

Within the framework of this contested discourse, the present essay asks what the difference is between "progressive Confucian" and the various things one might mean by "Confucian liberalism" or "liberal Confucian" and argues that the category "progressive Confucian" has important advantages over these "liberal" alternatives. Let us use the following as an initial definition of "progressive Confucian": progressive Confucianism is a commitment to the ongoing development of the Confucian tradition that emphasizes the importance of critically accepting the distinctive impacts of modernity on our diverse societies. Progressive Confucianism does not aim to reproduce past institutional structures except insofar as these structures still effectively promote the realization of central Confucian values in the contemporary world. Many progressive Confucians take individual and collective moral progress to be the central value which Confucianism seeks to realize. Many progressive Confucians, in addition, see the critique of various forms of oppression as a crucial step toward moral progress. Let me emphasize that while moral progress is often at the center of progressive Confucian theorizing, progressive Confucians are also very much concerned with institution building, institutional design, and the active critique of problematic contemporary institutions (including problematic rituals, on which see further below).

Some of the specific contents of progressive Confucianism bear resemblance to the conclusions drawn by other forms of "progressive" social movements in the modern world. Progressive Confucians stress two things, however. First, there are differences as well as similarities with other progressivisms, and even where there are similarities, progressive Confucian positions retain their own distinctiveness. Second, these similarities are not the results of simple borrowing from foreign perspectives, but rather result from internal Confucian developments in reaction to changes that are similar to those that have taken place in other human societies (for example, modern trends like urbanization and industrialization).

This essay begins with examples of progressive Confucians being labeled as "liberal" in ways that are misleading. I next turn to the use of "liberal" by influential twentieth-century New Confucians and then look at some contemporary theorists who are often labeled "liberal Confucians." Overall, for reasons having to do both with content and with rhetoric, I conclude that even Confucians who have been content to be called "liberal Confucians" should resist this label and identify as progressive Confucians instead.

Philosophers East and West, ancient and modern, have generally agreed that that clarity and precision in the use of language are important. The *Analects* records Confucius advocating the "rectification of names" because misuse of key categories causes confusion and even disorder. In that spirit, I begin this essay with two examples of Confucian thinkers labeling other Confucian thinkers as "liberal" in ways that are problematic. The first comes from a recent essay by Huaiyu Wang (2016) called "Between Hierarchy of Oppression and Style of Nourishment: Defending the Confucian Way of Civil Order." Professor Wang's stated goal in this essay is to "clarify the true meaning and foundation of the Confucian civil order and defend it against liberal and feminist criticisms" (2016, 559). The first part of the essay gives a charitable and insightful reading of Ban Gu 班固's theory of "Three Norms" (*sangang* 三綱); a more common translation of *sangang* is "Three Bonds," but Wang argues quite powerfully against this understanding of the term, and in general I find his argument to be persuasive. The problem emerges when Wang turns to defending his

understanding of Confucian civil order against criticisms based on "modern liberal and egalitarian values." He writes: "Let me start with a typical liberal criticism as presented by Stephen Angle in his *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*" (2016, 570). But my criticism is not meant to be a "liberal" criticism; it is explicitly presented as a "progressive Confucian" criticism. In fact, one has to read Wang's essay very carefully to even see what my concern is. He mentions in passing that my worry about oppression in traditional Chinese societies has to do with the "limited kind of virtue" to which women can aspire, but he then turns to a general discussion of liberalism (drawing, for example, from Will Kymlicka) and criticizing liberalism for failing to construct "truly nurturing and enlightening civil orders" (2016, 570–571). I am sympathetic with at least some of Wang's criticisms of modern liberalism, but they are completely beside the point as a response to my Confucian criticisms of oppression. In fact, Wang only addresses my actual concerns about oppression—namely, that it limits the abilities of those who suffer from it to develop as full moral beings—briefly and somewhat indirectly in the final paragraph of this section of his essay.[1]

By labeling my views as "liberal," in contrast to "the Confucian" position that Wang himself is defending, he rules out the possibility that Confucianism may be subject to more than one kind of development in the modern world. He also closes off discussion with the actual position that I defend, which becomes invisible as he criticizes liberalism instead. These same problems can be seen in the work of the prominent mainland Confucian thinker Jiang Qing. In 2013, three of Jiang's essays on Confucian constitutionalism were published in English translation, together with comments on Jiang's ideas by four

[1] The issue between us may be whether or not Confucians are centrally committed to individual moral progress and the ultimate possibility of becoming a sage. I believe that Confucians do hold such a commitment, and this does not rest on a "simplistic equation of *de* 德 with the English 'virtue'"(Wang 2016, 575), but rather on a broader—and, I believe, widely accepted—understanding of Confucianism. Some of what Wang says on this same page, suggests that he agrees that moral progress is important, but denies that the structural limitations I call "oppression" actually inhibits such development. This does indeed get at the heart of my argument, but his remarks here are too brief for me to fully understand.

scholars and then Jiang's responses to the commentaries. Three of the four commentators—Joseph Chan, Tongdong Bai, and Chenyang Li—self-identify as Confucian thinkers. Near the beginning of his response, Jiang writes: "Since their thought largely reflects the position of liberalism, I have also replied in a systematic way to the whole system of values of liberal democracy. . . . [This] is also an opportunity for me to present the response of China's Confucianism to these trends" (Jiang 2013, 161).[2] In the extended replies that follow, Jiang does periodically speak to specific issues raised by the commentators, but he never allows for the possibility that they may be offering an alternative way of understanding Confucianism. He alone is responsible for "the response of China's Confucianism" and interprets others as prioritizing democracy as a "universal structure of politics" with only a supplementary role for Confucian values (2013, 196). One result of Jiang's viewing the field as consisting solely of two options—his own monolithic Confucianism and an equally monolithic liberalism—is that in his extensive replies to the four commentators, he makes not a single concession to them: no revisions or supplements to his views are needed, he believes, because they simply do not understand Confucianism.

One kind of response to Jiang Qing (and to some of Wang Huaiyu's remarks) is to insist that liberalism is not monolithic and that many of its varieties are more interesting and defensible than the caricature that he criticizes. But my interest here is not so much in liberalism as in Confucianism. We have now seen two examples of scholars mislabeling Confucian positions as "liberal," but what about those cases in which Confucians explicitly embrace liberalism? Is this really what progressive Confucianism is? Let us consider the attitude toward liberalism of twentieth-century "New Confucians" Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan. Both men believe that Confucius and Confucianism exemplify a broad kind of liberalism or "liberal spirit." They both also believe that what they call "liberal democratic" political institutions are needed in present-day Confucian societies in order to fully realize this liberal spirit. Furthermore, to varying degrees they both also see

2 See also the Chinese version of Jiang's reply to Joseph Chan (Jiang 2016).

problems with or limitations of contemporary liberalism, either in the West or in societies like Taiwan and Hong Kong. Below, I will discuss whether it makes sense to call this set of views a kind of liberalism. First, let us look in more detail at the views of these two thinkers.

Although the terms they use to discuss liberalism are somewhat different, the basic standpoints of Mou and Xu are quite similar. They both see liberalism as, first of all, an attitude that an individual may have. According to Xu (1980a, 459), the spirit of liberalism lies in "self-mastery" (*zizuo zhuzai* 自作主宰), which he connects to individual "conscience and rationality" (*liangxin lixing* 良心理性). Individuals must stand partly above their traditions and actively refresh them in light of new challenges, rather than being the passive recipients of an external authority. Xu says that this kind of liberal spirit is found the world over—in fact, no culture could really exist without it—and was exemplified by Confucius, although he also says that it reached its heights in China in the Neo-Confucianism of the Southern Song dynasty (Xu 1980a, 460). For his part, Mou Zongsan stresses what he calls "subjective freedom" and "moral freedom"; here we need to keep in mind that *ziyou* 自由 can be translated as either "liberty" or "freedom," and the "liberalism" we have been talking about is *ziyou*-ism. Mou says that there are four keys to being a true liberal: respecting individuality, respecting the value of human character, being tolerant, and being rational. Liberalism, that is, is in the first instance a state of individual being that can be cultivated, and Mou argues that Confucius was one of the first and greatest instances of precisely this liberal character (Mou 2003a, 36-37, quoted in Peng 2016, 363).[3]

Both Mou and Xu assert that what Mou calls "objective freedom" —that is, objective structures that protect political (and perhaps other; see below) freedoms—is necessary for subjective freedom to be fully realized.[4] Mou sometimes discusses this in traditional terms, such as when he says that there is an inherent reality-external function

[3] Peng Guoxiang's recent book is extremely helpful for both its thorough collation of Mou's remarks on politics, and for Peng's insightful analysis.

[4] This is a particular emphasis in Ho (2001), though Ho also says that Mou and Xu leave crucial parts of the argument incomplete, awaiting further philosophical and practical innovation.

(*tiyong* 體用) relationship between moral and political freedom. More famously, he says that our subjective moral freedom must "restrict itself" (*ziwokanxian* 自我坎陷) in accord with the objective political structures that defend objective freedom, so that subjective freedom can be achieved.[5] Xu Fuguan says explicitly that Confucianism has not been able to achieve its full development because of its inability to avoid authoritarian governments; oppression, Xu emphasizes, is often political in nature and comes from governments. Therefore, Confucianism needs "democratic government that has human rights as its soul and a legislature as its structure" (Xu 1980b, 395; 1980a, 461).

Therefore, the liberalism of traditional Confucianism is imperfect, according to Xu, at least in part because of the lack of appropriate political institutions. At the same time, though, he also says that all liberalisms are imperfect, and in particular that Western liberalism can stand to learn things from Confucianism. Mou Zongsan is even more emphatic about the shortcomings of modern liberalism. He is concerned that Western liberalism, in the long process of being "concretized," has lost touch with the spirit that animates it (i.e., subjective freedom), with the result that it advocates a value-free, "gray world." Elsewhere he puts a similar worry in terms of "pan-liberalism" (*fan ziyouzhuyi* 泛自由主義), which refers to a kind of ubiquitous freedom that challenges all norms and hierarchies, losing its connection to morality. According to Mou, in the Chinese world this can be seen as a problematic legacy of the May Fourth-era critique of tradition (Mou 2003b, 265, quoted in Peng 2016, 353). True liberals, Mou says, are steadfast not only in their commitment to the value of human character, but also in their commitment to the "norms of relationship between fathers and sons, elder and younger brothers, and husbands and wives that apply within family life" (Mou 2003b, 51, quoted in Peng 2016, 367-368). Mou repeatedly emphasizes that humanistic education (*renwen jiaoyu* 人文教育) or "edification" (*jiaohua* 教化) is essential because of the way that it shapes what people do with their freedom and rights (Mou 2003b, 432-433, quoted in Peng 2016, 359).

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5 For "inherent reality-external function," see Peng (2016, 354); for "self-restriction," see Mou (1991).

In light of what we have now seen of Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan, does it make sense to label them as liberals? Whatever our answer is to this question, should we call them progressive Confucians? In response to both these questions, consider the following four points. First, much of what each of them means by "liberal" spirit or subjectivity is so broad as to apply to almost any healthy tradition. No one should be content to be entirely passively, uncritically shaped by his or her tradition, just as all of us should be open-minded and reasonable in our reflections on our traditions. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) has emphasized, living traditions rely on the continual asking and answering of questions by their participants.[6] Second, there is also a more specific content to both Mou's and Xu's use of the idea of "liberal" that focuses on the idea of free individual moral subjectivity. Third, to a significant degree, neither Xu nor Mou spends much effort thinking through the details of what objective political structures are needed to enable Confucian subjective or moral values to be realized in the modern world. Instead, they borrow the ready-made, Western ideas and institutions of "liberal democracy" and "human rights." Their arguments that institutional protections that were lacking in traditional China are needed in the modern world are, I think, compelling. However, there is a degree to which they do not fully carry out their project of "developing a new politics" (*kaichu xinwaiwang* 开出新外王) out of Confucianism itself, and thus a degree to which critics who claim that their politics are not deeply "Confucian" are correct. Fourth, Mou parts company from the liberals in his day by insisting that traditional family norms should be maintained by modern Confucians, notwithstanding their form of liberalism. This seems to be another way in which Mou did not thoroughly rethink what Confucianism means today, given the many changes in economic and social structures that have taken place. Taken together, the first, second, and third points all give support to the idea of labeling Mou and Xu as

[6] This is perhaps a good place to mention one other context in which Confucianism has been called "liberal": William Theodore de Bary's *The Liberal Tradition in China*. This book adopts a very loose sense of "liberal" to argue that Confucianism—and especially Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism—is centered on a reformist concern for humane welfare, rather than being a rigid, conformist ideology. See de Bary (1983, 6-7) and *passim.*

liberal Confucians, albeit for different sorts of reasons. The third and fourth points, though, suggest that they were not thorough-going progressive Confucians, even if in other respects they precisely model what progressive Confucians should strive to achieve.

Two critical remarks on Mou Zongsan and his legacy by Tang Wenming, a Confucian philosopher at Tsinghua University, can help to make clear where the shortcomings of Mou's development of Confucianism lie. Tang says that Mou's central theoretical device of "self-restriction" makes the question of institutionalization of modern Confucianism too easy. It seems to allow for too much of a disconnection between traditional Confucian values and institutions, on the one hand, and the modern institutions that replace them, so that Mou avoids the hard work of figuring out precisely in what ways institutions must change, and how these new institutions support Confucian values (Tang 2012, 291). Self-restriction functions almost like a magic trick, allowing Mou to endorse liberal democracy without careful consideration. Second, this lessened attention to institutional details is continued to an even greater degree, Tang says, by influential intellectuals who carried on Mou's legacy, like Liu Shuxian and Du Weiming (better known to readers in the English-speaking world as Tu Wei-ming). Tang writes that these scholars have focused on vague projects like "global dialogue" and "dialogue among religions," with relatively little concrete effect (2012, 290-291). Without wanting to completely endorse Tang's own ideas on institutionalization, I agree that the tie between liberalism and the philosophy of Mou and his followers is not well-grounded. We can agree with Mou and with Du that Confucianism has entered a new era, but perhaps not with them on the role that liberalism should play in that era. Progressive Confucianism needs to develop its own, distinctive social critiques and institutional proposals.

Let us now turn from what we might call the mixed legacy of twentieth-century Confucianism to some examples of contemporary scholars who explicitly invoke both Confucianism and liberalism. The key methodological issue on which I want to focus is: do these theorists view Confucianism and liberalism as two independent commitments that they aim to harmonize, or does Confucianism

play a more fundamental role in their thought? That is, are they hybrid Confucian-Liberals (or Liberal-Confucians), or are they better understood as liberalized (or more accurately, "progressive") Confucians? This distinction will become clearer once we look at some actual examples.

One place to begin is with a 2014 essay by Hu Yan, a scholar based at Shandong Normal University, exploring what its author claims is an emerging trend of "Confucian liberalism."[7] Hu Yan (2014) observes both that many current Confucians seem to be sympathetic to at least some liberal values and that some current Chinese liberals seem to be stepping back from the radical criticism of the Chinese tradition that we associate with the May Fourth movement. He then gives an overview of key theoretical obstacles to any sort of rapprochement between the two traditions (conceptions of self, liberty, and justice); he sees more room for agreement on issues like social justice than on the structure of formal justice. The detailed arguments of this essay are not important for our purposes, since its author's goal is to identify a trend rather than to support or critique that trend. What is important, then, is the way that Hu Yan understands the trend. He clearly treats it as a (partial) coming together of two distinct traditions, each with its own values, driven by an increasing ability to recognize the values embraced by the "other" tradition. Hu does not treat these changes as driven by internal developments within one or the other tradition; instead, he suggests there has been a mutual realization that the two have more in common than had been originally thought. Exactly what would be the motivation for further changes within one or the other tradition is left unclear.

One of the Confucian theorists briefly mentioned in the article I just discussed is the scholar and public intellectual Yao Zhongqiu, who also writes under the penname of Qiu Feng. He is particularly interesting in the present context because he began his intellectual career as a liberal—he has a background in classical liberalism and

[7] See also the earlier discussion of "Confucian liberalism" (*rujiao ziyou zhuyi* 儒教自由主義) in Liu (1998), which seems not to have made much of an impact on the intellectual world and is not mentioned in the 2014 essay discussed here.

Austrian School economics and translated some of Hayek's writings into Chinese—but over time has come to identify as a Confucian. While at one time it might have been correct to think of Qiu Feng as exemplifying the "dual commitment" model and looking for a hybrid Confucianism-Liberalism, over time his commitment to Confucianism has deepened—perhaps even to a problematic degree, as I will discuss. His basic train of thought is to emphasize the role of constitutionalism within traditional Confucianism in restraining the power of leaders, and thereby supporting a rational social order; and then to argue that under modern circumstances, this idea of Confucian constitutionalism needs to be further developed (see, for example, Qiu 2013b). He has stressed the need to "understand and reinterpret Confucianism completely from the perspective of liberal constitutionalism" (Qiu 2013a, 25). It is true that he says that as a result of being stimulated and challenged by liberalism, "Confucian values and thought will achieve a new lease on life, a 'rebirth through retreating' (*xinsheng zhuanjin* 新生轉進)"; and he subtitles a 2012 article "the standpoint of a liberal" (Yao 2012). But his views on the past strengths and weaknesses of Confucianism, and on the future direction in which Confucianism must develop, do not depend on his commitment to liberalism. Instead, they depend on his understanding that Confucianism must further emphasize certain preexisting features in order to better realize what he takes to be Confucianism's central commitment to a rational social order.

Qiu Feng's writings illustrate one of the difficulties facing any proponent of "Confucian constitutionalism": namely, the need to strike a delicate balance between showing that the tradition of Confucianism already embraces "constitutionalism" in one or more forms, but also arguing that the traditional types or degrees of constitutionalism were inadequate. After all, even the most "conservative" (or even "fundamentalist") interpreters of Confucianism today recognize that a modern Confucian politics cannot re-institute the traditional monarchy and its supporting system of rituals and other institutions. So Confucian constitutionalists must explain why things need to change. But at the same time, they need to argue that there was enough "constitutionalism" in the tradition for the modern developments to still count as "Confucian." In calling this a "delicate balance,"

I do not suggest that it is impossible to achieve. But it is easy to go wrong, and Qiu Feng is sometimes too soft on the tradition, coming close to suggesting that all the concepts and institutions needed for contemporary Confucianism were already present in the tradition. For example, in one essay he discusses the similarities between the traditional idea of "designated lot" (*mingfen* 名分) and modern ideas of rights and duties (Qiu 2013b, 138). It is true that there are some similarities, but there are also crucial differences that affect how successfully the two different sets of ideas can protect modern citizens. Similarly, in another place Qiu Feng writes about the ways in which Han Confucians were able to use interpretations of the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals) as a kind of "fundamental law" and draws out a comparison with the idea of common law (2013b, 147). Once again, while there are indeed some interesting similarities, arguments based on the interpretation of canonical texts cannot serve average, modern citizens in anything like the same way that modern constitutions and laws can. I am not arguing that currently existing, Western, liberal constitutional arrangements are the only possible, or the best possible, forms of modern constitutionalism. A central tenet of progressive Confucianism is that modern politics can be distinctively Confucian. But neither "designated lot" nor *Spring and Autumn Annals* interpretation is sufficient for modern Confucian constitutionalism. Modern, progressive Confucianism needs to develop beyond this and not necessarily in ways that mimic contemporary liberalism. Since Qiu Feng's recent writings focus on the traditional side of the "constitutionalism" equation, rather than on the ways in which Confucianism needs to be further developed, I conclude that for now, it is difficult to say whether he would be willing to embrace the progressive Confucian agenda.

The most prominent contemporary mainland Confucian to overtly claim the title of "liberal Confucian" is Professor Huang Yushun of Shandong University. In an article called "How Is Liberal Confucianism Possible?," Huang emphasizes that he is not asking "is liberal Confucianism possible?": he takes the ideas and practices of earlier scholars like Xu Fuguan to be clear evidence that it is possible. His question is what explains the possibility of liberal Confucianism.

Huang also clarifies that his own understanding of Confucianism—which he labels "Life Confucianism"—is not limited to a form of liberalism. He is content to have the empirical (*xingxia* 形下), political side of his thought labeled as "liberal," but Life Confucianism also has metaphysical and existential dimensions that are distinctively Confucian, having nothing to do with liberalism. In this connection, Huang (2016a, 2) says that he largely agrees with the Taiwanese Confucian Lee Ming-huei's primarily political criticisms of the "dangerous direction" in which mainland Confucians are going, even though Huang sharply disagrees with Lee's more metaphysical ideas.[8]

According to Huang (2016a, 10-12), the reason that liberal Confucianism is possible is that like all forms of thought, Confucianism must adapt to underlying changes in the structure of social life. He sketches a general picture of social development and corresponding political change in China, leading up to the idea that China is currently experiencing a "New Axial Age" that involves both a dramatic transition to more individualistic social life and the rise of broadly democratic politics. He believes that this process began quite early in both China and the West and insists that it is a process of internal Chinese development, not something forced on China by the West or other outside factors. How else, Huang asks, can we understand Huang Zongxi's criticism of autocracy or Dai Zhen's criticism of Song-derived orthodoxy? In Huang's view, external factors like the Manchu invasion and Western imperialism help to explain not the origin of this transition to modernity, but the reasons that the transition has been such an extended, painful process. In any event, the process is now well underway and provides the underlying justification for liberal Confucianism. Huang writes that the key to any theory of justice—including the Confucian understanding of justice—is not whether an individual follows existing norms, but whether the existing norms themselves are just. This is the question of "institutional justice." Confucius himself recognized that existing norms (rituals, *li* 禮) sometimes need to change, and thus that all norms are potentially subject

[8] For more on Lee Ming-huei's and Huang's criticisms of "Mainland New Confucianism," see Angle (2018b).

to critique. As Huang says elsewhere, "according to the Chinese Theory of Justice, whether an institution is proper depends on whether it has its basis in . . . humaneness" (2016b, 9; 2009). Huang concludes his essay on Confucian liberalism by stating that Confucius was not conservative, but revolutionary; if he were alive today, "he would definitely be a liberal" (2016a, 17-18).

This brief summary of Huang's argument shows clearly that he makes a number of provocative claims, but for our purposes, the key question is whether his position is best described as a form of "liberal Confucianism." It is clear that his is not a "dual commitment" model: he sees the changes to Confucianism that he describes as "liberal" as demanded by Confucianism itself, as it adapts to the underlying changes in the structure of Chinese social life.[9] But are the changes that Huang envisions best described as "liberal"? I can see three possible reasons for an affirmative answer. First, it may be that Huang believes that the package of institutions that we call "liberal democracy" is the only real option in the current era, much as Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan sought to directly borrow the Western version of liberal democracy as the "new politics" they believed that Confucianism required. A second possibility is that Huang in fact believes that liberal democracy is specifically required by the prevalence of modern individualism. He stresses the ubiquity of individualism in social, economic, and political life, drawing examples as much from the United States as from China, and concludes that efforts by other mainland Confucians to restore a family-based ethics and to stress traditional Confucian roles are confused, reactionary, and dangerous (Huang 2016a, 18; Huang and Angle 2017a).

Before looking at the third reason for insisting on "liberal," let me offer a rebuttal to these first two reasons. The problem with Huang's argument is that it relies on a false dichotomy between family-based society (in which only the male head of household casts a ballot,

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[9] In this sense, a more apt title for the essay might actually have been "Why Is Liberal Confucianism Necessary?" (自由主義儒家何以必要). In Angle (2012, 16), I label Huang a "synthetic Confucian" because of my mistaken belief that his thought was based in dual commitments. I have since had the opportunity to discuss this issue with Huang and to correct my understanding. See Huang and Angle (2017a; 2017b).

for example) and a completely individual-based society. I agree that modern social life demands something closer to individualism than to pure familism, but in fact modern Confucians should accept neither of these extremes. As I have argued in another essay, it is possible for modern Confucianism to embrace the emphasis that Confucianism has always placed on human relationships without also embracing the traditional parameters for the roles we occupy (Angle 2018a). Personhood and agency result from individuation within a network of relationships; currently existing rituals (in the broad, Confucian sense of *li*) define the starting points for this process, but the rituals themselves both are made one's own through the unique process of oneself occupying them and also are subject to criticism and change.[10] If this analysis is correct, then Huang's capitulation to the idea that modern social life is simply centered around individuals was too fast. It is true that our political institutions must respect each individual, but it is not true that the only option for our social, public life is the full package of individualistic, liberal democracy. And so long as there are other potential options that might provide viable forms of contemporary Confucian politics, Huang's argument that liberalism is Confucianism's only option is quite weak. This is by no means to reject Huang's entire analysis; as I have already noted above, he himself argues forcefully that Confucian rituals must be subject to criticism and change. But it is not clear that Huang's position is most helpfully described as "liberal."

A third and final reason for insisting on "liberal" as a label is that freedom or liberty (*ziyou*) is central goal for Confucianism. It is indeed true that a certain kind of freedom or autonomy has always been important for Confucians: people are supposed to act ethically in free, spontaneous fashion. This is Confucius who, at age 70, was able to "follow his heart's desires without overstepping the line."[11] I have already noted that Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan emphasize this

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10 I draw here on the seminal work of David Hall and Roger Ames (1987), and on the important clarification, emphasizing the importance of critically assessing rituals, provided by Robert Cummings Neville (2016).

11 *Analects* 2.4. In conversation with the author, Ren Jiantao cited precisely this passage in order to justify speaking of "liberal Confucianism."

aspect of Confucianism when they speak of things like "subjective" or "moral" freedom. Given the strong resonances of *ziyou* with external liberty and with the liberalism that emphasizes it, labelling Confucianism as "liberal Confucianism" simply because it endorses inner freedom and spontaneity is highly misleading. When Huang and I had a chance to discuss this issue in public, he acknowledged the problems to which speaking of "liberal Confucianism" could give rise, though he insisted that it is crucial for Confucians to continue to be able to speak of liberty. He suggested that a possible solution—at least in Chinese—was to use "*ziyou rujia* 自由儒家" (liberty Confucianism) instead of "*ziyouzhuyi rujia* 自由主義儒家" (liberalism Confucianism) (Huang and Angle 2017b). In my view this still makes liberty more central to modern Confucianism than is appropriate, even though I absolutely agree that *ziyou* in its various senses is still an important value for Confucians, and Confucians must be able to continue to "speak of liberty." "Liberty Confucianism" also continues to be far too close to "liberalism," with all the problems this conflation brings. Instead, we should speak of progressive Confucianism and recognize the importance, for progressive Confucians, of various kinds of freedom.

One problem remains for "progressive Confucianism": I must acknowledge that "progress" and "progressive" (and their Chinese counterpart, *jinbu* 進步) are themselves complex ideas, which has the potential to render the idea of "progressive Confucianism" itself unclear. In order to conclude my argument that we should nonetheless prefer it to "liberal Confucianism," I will end with a consideration of Bao Wenxin's (2017) outstanding essay "'Progressive Confucianism': A Label with a Vague Meaning?" Bao notes that especially in the "Preface to the Chinese Edition" of *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, I acknowledge and try to resolve some of the vagueness surrounding "progressive," but he argues persuasively that things are even more complicated than I recognize. Drawing on the analysis of Gao Ruiquan, Bao tells us that modern or contemporary thinkers in China have meant as many as four different things by "progress": (1) belief in social perfectionism; (2) belief in the improvement and perfection of subjective virtue; (3) belief that human rationality, epistemic abilities, knowledge, and scientific technology will continuously im-

prove; and (4) belief that human powers to control the natural world will continuously improve (Bao 2017, drawing on Gao 1999).[12] Bao (2017) then goes on to point out that not only is the idea of individual, subjective moral progress clearly a central Confucian goal, but great Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) even occasionally use "*jinbu*" in more or less this sense.[13]

Bao next argues that social perfectionism—the idea that human society will or should progress towards ever-better states—is not a mainstream, traditional Confucian view, and neither are views (3) or (4). Since I regularly gloss progressive Confucianism as (in part) about individual and collective moral progress, he sees a need for clarification here: the fact that social perfectionism has come to be central to many modern Confucians, myself included, is the product of twentieth- and twenty-first century developments. This is not to disagree with the importance of social perfectionism, but to emphasize that it has emerged as part of a living, changing Confucian tradition in conversation with other traditions, rather than being a clear dimension of pre-modern Confucianism. I think there is a degree to which Bao is correct (and his careful studies of the role of "progress" in the thought of several important twentieth-century thinkers tend to bear him out),[14] but it is worth noting that the emphasis on ceaseless, life-giving generativity (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息) that is central to Neo-Confucianism at the very least provides a solid foothold in the tradition for current Confucian social perfectionism. In addition,

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12 Bao adds that for many modern thinkers, progress in one or more of the above senses is not just a matter of human action but is the cosmic Way (*tiandao* 天道) itself (using "cosmic Way" very loosely, to include the views of evolutionists, Confucians, and Marxist believers in historical materialism).

13 Zhu Xi is recorded as saying: "Emphasizing loyalty and trustworthiness is standing firm [literally, standing on one's feet]; moving toward rightness is progress [literally stepping forward]. When one gradually moves forward one's virtue naturally increases 主忠信是劄脚处, 徙義是進步处. 渐渐進去, 則德自崇矣" (Zhu 1986, 1086). For his part, Wang Yangming (1992, 171) once said, "Starting today you and your comrades must strive together and encourage each other, pledging your lives to progress" 自今當與諸君, 努力鞭策, 誓死進步" (Wang 1992, 171).

14 See Bao (2013; 2015).

I want to emphasize that as I use the term, "progress" does not imply a specific, predetermined teleology, and in this way it is very different from the Marxist notions of progress that are prevalent in the discourse of the Chinese Communist Party.

With Bao's help, in short, I can clarify that the "progress" in "progressive Confucianism" is twofold—open-ended social perfectionism and individual moral perfectionism—and does not emphasize the third and fourth of Gao's senses. This is not enough, however, because at the heart of progressive Confucianism is the idea that these two types of improvement necessarily go hand in hand. Social progress is only possible because of individual moral progress, and (more strikingly, perhaps) moral progress is only possible because of social progress. This is the "inner sage, outer king" (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王) duality about which I have written extensively elsewhere, and it is this connection that drives the progressive Confucian critique of all forms of oppression as well as the need for political participation. Modern Confucians who are willing to countenance continued forms of gender-based oppression or to deny people the right to robust political participation are therefore not progressive Confucians.

It is time to review what we have learned. We have observed a tendency for some contemporary Confucian thinkers to resist the idea that under the conditions of modernity, Confucianism needs to develop in significant new ways, and some of these thinkers then label any effort to develop a constructive Confucian response to modernity as "liberalism." We have also seen that twentieth-century Confucians like Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan saw the need for the development of a new, Confucian form of politics but to a great degree were content to borrow Western liberal-democratic institutions and did not thoroughly think through the implications of Confucianism for modern social and political institutions. Finally, we have examined various kinds of current Confucian thinking that have sometimes been labeled "liberal" Confucianism, but I have suggested that "liberalism" is generally a poor fit for the ideas involved. We need a different category, a better way to express the idea that Confucianism itself is undergoing positive developments, for reasons rooted in its own central values, during the modern and contemporary eras.

I believe that "progressive Confucianism" is a useful way to capture this important trend. To conclude, let me emphasize that resisting the label of "liberal Confucianism" is not meant to settle in advance substantive questions like the comparative importance of formal liberty versus social justice. Especially in popular Western political discourse today, "progressive" can equate to a willingness to trade away some formal liberties in order to more vigorously combat oppression or inequality.[15] Whether progressive Confucians should agree will depend on detailed argument that is beyond the scope of this essay. For present purposes, the key is to remember that progressive Confucianism is not a hybrid between a free-standing progressivism and a separate commitment to Confucianism; it is a modern form of Confucianism that must work out its responses to such challenges in its own terms. Such conversations are currently underway throughout East Asia and beyond; my goal here has been to clarify the degree to which we are all talking to one another.

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