

with imperial authority. Thus, their book is not just stuffed full of abstract ideas but is vividly peopled by personages who thought and acted in hopes of ameliorating state and society.

ON-CHO NG

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***Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism.***

By Stephen C. Angle. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012. Pp. x + 204. £55.00 cloth, £17.99 paper.

This book is a highly stimulating attempt to engage critically with Confucian political philosophy in order to advocate a brand of “progressive Confucianism” relevant in a Chinese context but also beyond. It is structured in eight well-balanced chapters, including an introduction (Chapter 1) and a conclusion (Chapter 8), addressing a series of controversial issues about Confucianism while gradually proposing sets of new ideas.

What is so progressive about “progressive Confucianism”? Angle explains in the introduction (p. 17) that the term has a double meaning: It entails a *commitment to moral progress*, both at the individual and at the collective levels while sharing with other progressive social and political movements—at least to some extent—a critical attitude towards all forms of “social, economic, or political oppression.” These two dimensions are not devoid of tension and this is undoubtedly one of the main interests of the book.

Angle largely builds on the work of philosopher Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and more precisely on his byzantine concept of moral mind’s self-restriction (*ziwo kanxian* 自我坎陷) in order to make his argument. His precise interpretation of this pivotal concept is the focus of Chapter 2 but also runs across several other chapters: It is in itself an important contribution to our understanding of Mou’s thought even though Angle also largely emancipates himself from Mou. In brief, self-restriction plays a role in different dimensions of Mou’s philosophy (including, as Angle mentions, cognition, science, and politics). In his metaphysical system, self-restriction applies to moral mind in its interplay with our epistemic (i.e., cognitive) mind. But what Angle is primarily interested in is the role of self-restriction in politics. As a Confucian, Mou Zongsan is still committed to the preservation of a link between morality and politics, but he rejects classical connections between the two and a vision of politics being swallowed by morality (pp. 24–25), which implies all sorts of possible excesses

(be it in a totalitarian system or in the Chinese imperial system). Morality and politics can be linked only indirectly, which demands that legal and political institutions be independent from claims of virtue: As Angle posits a bit further in the book, “even sages cannot violate the constitution” (p. 66). In other words, claims of virtue—Angle speaks also about “ethical reasoning”—need to restrict themselves and allow room for objective independent legal and political institutions, that is, for a democratic system. The latter is considered a precondition for the fulfilment of virtue in the political realm and, as such, *an intrinsic necessity within Confucianism* (to be distinguished from a mere compatibility with Confucianism).

In Chapter 3, Angle continues discussing the importance of democracy as a system that potentially enables the best collective realization—i.e., both perception and actualization—of what he calls coherence (pp. 48–50). Coherence is a translation of the neo-Confucian notion of *li* 理. It points to a structuring of the cosmos that is (1) *valuable*, (2) *intelligible* by potentially anyone, and (3) “such that all things can fit together into a single, dynamic harmony” (p. 48). Coherence is identified with Heaven (*tian* 天), and therefore refers to a source of authority. The reasons it is democracy and not, for instance, a state governed by an enlightened despot, a self-acclaimed sage or an elitist bureaucracy that constitutes the best means of realizing coherence are that: first, it is democracy and its formal institutions that practically maximize the chances to take “coherent” decisions; and, second, democracy (of a progressive Confucian brand) enables the optimal moral development of the individual. In fact, in Angle’s progressive Confucian understanding of democracy, *moral agency* is placed in the hands of the people who are considered the holders of authority (p. 47), a situation that largely differs from classical Confucian conceptions. This of course implies a strong emphasis on moral education and does not seem necessarily to translate into a “one man one vote” policy (this point is not discussed in depth but Angle writes: “Nothing in what I have said so far, in fact, requires that each adult get an equal say in the political process.” [p. 51] See also pp. 57–58).

Chapter 4 elaborates further by discussing the relation between rule of law and virtue politics. After contextualizing the issue by introducing several modern and contemporary debates, Angle draws a few lessons for progressive democratic Confucianism: In brief—and always in the vein of what has been stated about self-restriction—virtue should be contained (institutionally but also by allowing enough room for contestation and dissonance) even though it could play an “accommodation” role in order to moderate the contestation of politics and law (pp. 72–73). Chapter 5 broadens the discussion by taking into account international law and human rights. Based on Mou’s self-restriction and Zhao Tingyang’s 趙汀陽 *tianxia* 天下 philosophy, it posits that Confucians should participate in a human rights regime and introduces what “the rights of all-under-heaven” could mean from a Confucian perspective.

Chapter 6 discusses the ideas of ritual/propriety and civility that can all be translated with the Chinese term *li* 禮 and concerning which Angle tells us that it constitutes, with ethics and law, the tripod on which progressive Confucianism rests (p. 91). He emphasizes the importance of the communicating dimension of ritual and advocates a minimal form: “As we practice it meshes with the ethical virtue of propriety” (p. 109). Chapter 7 posits that given that “the situations in which one can actively participate in shaping public goals and endeavors are of great importance to one’s moral development” (p. 115), Confucians should be concerned with their social and economic environment and engage in social critique. This engagement can take the form of a resistance against oppression. Angle develops this point by focusing on gender oppression, explaining that women’s oppression, by containing them to the private sphere, limits the kind of virtue to which they can aspire (p. 118). He links his reflections to the more general issue of “moral luck” and the necessity to fight against structural features undermining the possibility for some people or groups to develop morally. However, at the same time he insists on the fact that resistance against oppression does not mean rejection of all forms of hierarchy and deference. One of the arguments is that oppression occurs between groups whereas deference and hierarchy primarily relate to interpersonal relations.

The conclusion of the book emphasizes the way progressive Confucianism balances ethical, political, and ritual norms, and ponders “about the actual shape that a Confucian virtue-ritual-politics might take” while asserting the universal validity of the truths it articulates (pp. 137–38). It suggests that new public rituals could be invented and that “a moderate perfectionism” could be promoted in education partly based on Confucian resources. Probably influenced by the high degree of legalism prevailing in American society, Angle also explains that progressive Confucianism should encourage citizens to think of law as a “system of second resort”: education and ethical growth should enable citizens to understand at what point it makes sense or not to invoke the legal machinery. The book ends up with a few reflections on the fate of Confucianism as a “wandering soul,” that is, severed from its traditional institutions in the modern era, while re-emphasizing that a progressive Confucianism also offers relevant insights much beyond a Chinese context.

There are so many issues raised in this brilliant book that it is difficult to render justice to them all. Speaking about a specifically Chinese context, Angle’s book offers a welcomed reactivation of “liberal Confucianism” in political philosophy and, by the same token, a useful counterweight to brands of Confucianism frontally opposed to democracy and rule of law. But also interesting is the fact that progressive Confucianism is introduced as a philosophy potentially relevant to extra-Chinese contexts. The centrality of a commitment to citizens’ *moral progress* is for instance something scarcely formulated today—at least as such—in Western European countries: Claims for equal rights are rather made in the general name of justice with-

out being much more specific; grassroots participatory (and non-elective) politics are scarcely discussed in terms of moral growth either. In that respect, the perspectives offered by Angle's book are definitely innovative and stimulating even though they might be considered with some amount of reluctance in societies suspicious about any attempt of the State to intervene in the field of values.

Angle mentions that "there is a vibrant debate within Western political philosophy over whether it is appropriate for states to support a particular set of values by including them in state-sponsored educational curricula" (p. 140). In France, this debate has recently taken a much more practical turn with a law voted by the parliament that followed a proposal from the Minister of Education, himself a philosopher by training. From 2015 onwards, all French children (from basically 6 to 18 years old) will have a compulsory one-hour-weekly course of "secular morals" (*morale laïque*). These "secular morals" will consist of studying and pondering over pivotal values of the French republic. In what is being analysed as a global context of crisis—not only economic but also civic and moral—this measure is supposed to encourage autonomy (of consciousness and judgement) and facilitate a way of "living together" thanks to the acquisition of personal virtues necessary for the common good.<sup>1</sup> The programmes that should also encompass a practical dimension are currently being devised and their concrete content remains currently unclear. But there is no doubt that they will be deeply rooted in classical French Republican "ideology." And this brings me back to Angle and the relevance of progressive Confucianism to extra-Chinese contexts. At the end of the volume, Angle gives some clues about what a "Confucian moderate perfectionist education might look like in practice" (p. 141) and he mentions a number of elements (e.g., biographies of Confucian exemplars, sets of virtues and values that he discussed earlier in the book, or civic rituals) of which we can only say that they might not be easily transplanted into non-Chinese cultures. In fact, as it is presented in the book, progressive Confucianism—even though it is imbued with a humanistic ideal that may resonate with other humanistic ideals elsewhere—still remains highly context-dependent. Additional research might be necessary to get a better understanding about how it could take root in other cultural backgrounds and complement existing traditions. In any case, reading Angle's books is always a very stimulating and rewarding experience and *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* is no exception to the rule.

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<sup>1</sup> On all these points, see the detailed interview of Vincent Peillon, Minister of Education, in *Le Monde*: [http://www.lemonde.fr/ecole-primaire-et-secondaire/article/2013/04/22/la-morale-laique-fait-le-pari-de-la-liberte-de-jugement-de-chacun\\_3163887\\_1473688.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/ecole-primaire-et-secondaire/article/2013/04/22/la-morale-laique-fait-le-pari-de-la-liberte-de-jugement-de-chacun_3163887_1473688.html).