

# 1. Introduction

The present study provides a systematic and coherent examination of the contents, axiological innovations and social significance of Modern Confucianism introducing to a wider academic audience in the West its most important contributions to contemporary global theory.

In international sinology, this line of thought is translated with various names, ranging from *Neo-Confucianism* or *Contemporary* or *Modern Neo-Confucianism*, to *New Confucianism* and *Modern* or *Contemporary Confucianism*. The first series, which includes the term Neo-Confucianism, is impractical because it is often confused with Neo-Confucianism, a term which in Western sinology denotes the reformed Confucian philosophies of the Song and Ming periods (*li xue* or *xingli xue*). I therefore generally prefer the term *Modern Confucianism*, given that we are dealing with philosophical discourses that belong to Chinese modernity. A similar confusion can be found in Chinese discourses, which generally denote this line of thought with one of the following expressions: *Xin ruxue*, *Xiandai xin ruxue*, *Xiandai ruxue*, *Dangdai xin ruxue* etc.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Chinese, I find the expression *Xiandai xin ruxue* to be the most appropriate, the reason being that in China, as opposed to European sinological discourses, the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties has never been associated with the concept of new Confucianism (*Xin ruxue*) and therefore the character which denotes “new” in this phrase is not problematic.

The current is defined as the search for a synthesis between Western and traditional East Asian thought, in order to elaborate a system of ideas and values capable of resolving the social and political problems of the modern, globalized world. The philosophers belonging to this stream of thought, have namely attempted to reconcile “Western” and “traditional Chinese” values, in order to create a theoretical model of modernization that would not be confused or equated with “Westernization”. In this study, I mainly analyze the most important works written by the leading theoreticians of the so-called second generation of new Modern Confucians, who were most active in the second half of the twentieth century. The most influential philosophers belonging to this generation were Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi and Fang Dongmei. The present study focuses on the interpolation of their thought into the methodological and theoretical framework of contemporary theories of modernization.

While most of the philosophers of the second generation of Modern Confucianism were active in the first two thirds of the twentieth century and primarily lived in Taiwan and Hong Kong, this current also began to emerge in the P. R. China (People’s Republic of China) during the last two decades of the century. It is generally agreed that Modern Confucianism offered theoreticians in mainland China certain basic elements for the formulation of new ideologies, which combine neo-liberal elements in the economic sphere with authoritarian elements in the political one. As the present study clearly shows, the Modern Confucians generally followed the more egalitarian and democratic Mencian current of Confucian thought, while in their efforts to construct a “harmonic society”, the ideologists of the P. R. China mostly rely on the more autocratic and legalistic interpretations of the original Confucian teachings, first formulated by Xunzi. The same holds true for the leading contemporary populist Confucian scholars, as for instance, for Jiang Qing (2003) who developed the well-known political theory which is based upon the notion of Constitutional or Political Confucianism (*zhengzhi ruxue*).

This distinction is of the utmost importance, and indicates the sort of differentiations that must be made in order to acquire a proper understanding of Modern Confucianism and its theories, while refuting the idea that it represents some monolithic theoretical formation. On the contrary, it includes a wide range of theoretical

discourses based on a tradition that is already very complex and heterogeneous.

In order to provide a broader picture of the current, the present study not only examines the main Modern Confucian philosophical approaches, ideas and methods, but also explores the political, social and ideological backgrounds of the so-called Confucian revival and its connections with the ideological foundations of East Asian modernity. Thus, after the introduction in which I tried to sketch the global significance and the intercultural framework of the subject matter, the book opens (Chapter 2) with the general characterization of modernity, revealing the historical and political conditions in which the Chinese modernization process was embedded. It proceeds with a general introduction of the Modern Confucian movement (Chapter 3), focusing on their central concerns and intellectual approaches and, at the same time, drawing attention to some problematic issues they might imply.

John Makeham (2003, 33) points out that while the works of the Modern Confucian theorists certainly have important implications in the area of cultural philosophy (*wenhua zhexue*), it is quite evident that their primary focus is on a number of underlying metaphysical issues. Despite the ambivalence of some writers, most of the Modern Confucian scholarship during the 1990s focused on the identity of the movement as a philosophical school (Makeham 2003, 33).

Hence, after determining this sociological and cultural framework of Chinese modernization discourses in which the second generation of the Modern Confucian theoreticians, who represent the main subject matter of the present study, were living and working, the book focuses upon the introduction of the main philosophical contributions of this intellectual current. This part begins (Chapter 5) with a debate on their respective political philosophies and then (Chapter 6) proceeds to investigations in the deeper levels of their theories, introducing the main innovations in their ontological, metaphysical, and epistemological studies. In the conclusion, the book offers a short summary of the most important research results and delineates some possible future prospects of Modern Confucianism.

For European researchers, the effort to understand non-European cultures is inevitably linked to the issue of differences in language, tradition, history and socialization processes. A fundamental premise of

the present study is that Western epistemology represents only one of many different models of human comprehension. The proposed research thus follows the main methodological principles of intercultural research, taking into account the incommensurability of diversely (culturally) conditioned paradigms, or theoretical frameworks deriving from diversely formed discourses of different cultural and linguistic environments. The methods applied seek to synthesize general perspectives, knowledge, skills, interconnections and epistemologies, in order to facilitate the study of a topic which, while intrinsically coherent, cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective. Within the broader scope of intercultural humanities, the book is thus structured in an interdisciplinary fashion, and comprises methods and forms of investigation pertaining to the following research areas:

- Socio-cultural perspective: different patterns of modernization;
- Epistemology: the cultural and linguistic conditionality of comprehension;
- Chinese intellectual history: the political and ideal background of Modern Confucianism;
- Comparative philosophy (the impact of German Idealism upon modern Confucian philosophers, their elaboration of traditional paradigms and the creation of syntheses between Chinese and Western philosophies);
- Conceptual analysis (the elaboration and cultural renewal of crucial modernization concepts—especially *subject* and *reason*—in Asian philosophies);
- Axiology: the creation of new “Asian Values” and the contribution of Modern Confucian ethics to the new values of the contemporary world;
- Ideology studies: the impact of Modern Confucianism on new theoretical streams in East Asia and the theoretical background of the new prevailing ideology in the P. R. China, which is based upon the concept of harmony.

Regarding the general methodological framework of the present book, it is important to bear in mind that the understanding of so-called “foreign cultures” is inextricably interwoven with the issue of the diversity of languages, traditions, histories and socialization processes. The interpretation of the various aspects and elements of “non-European” cultures are likewise influenced by the geographic, political and economic positions of both the interpreter and the element being interpreted. Intercultural research always includes translation issues, but this is clearly not limited to merely rendering one language into another, but also involves the “translation” or transposition of different discourses. This form of translation involves interpretations of individual textual and speech structures, categories, concepts and values that differ depending on their socio-cultural contexts. For this reason, we often encounter a discrepancy between the etymological and the functional understanding of a given expression. In some cases, the same expression may even be understood completely differently, depending on the general social context of the two different societies in which it appears.

The proper methodology for studying Chinese philosophy—which is still interpreted based primarily on premises deriving from the traditional Western social sciences and humanities—is found not only in the recognition of a “different theoretical model”, but in the relativization of the values systems<sup>2</sup> and perception structures. In order for this relativization to take place, we need to gain insights into the conceptual structures and connections among the concrete historical, economic, political and cultural (philosophical) systems that underlie Chinese social reality. The awareness of these underlying fundamentals—which also inevitably influence the basic theoretical approaches, methods and conceptual framework—constitute a platform which permits an understanding of Chinese philosophy at its most profound levels.

Intercultural research in the field of Chinese philosophy should approach the Chinese cultural and linguistic area through its own language and texts. This approach is of key importance, for it is the only way (at least within the frame created by the very essence of Western methodologies) to overcome an absolute dichotomy between the active subject and passive object in cultural research. In the Chinese language, the use of primary sources provides insights into

the structure of issues and interpretations that are characteristic of the socialization process, as well as the contents and methodological approaches that form the research subjects.

Another difficulty in researching classical philosophy is understanding and mediating traditional contents, both oral and textual, that are structured in accordance with different grammatical and semantic systems. The essential postulates of modern academic discourses (as well as the methodologies deriving from them) continue to be part of the “indisputable” discourses of the Western (especially European) tradition. Trying to squeeze different aspects of various “non-European” realities into such formal templates and procedures can lead the researcher to an interpretative dead end or, even worse, result in a total misconstruing of the subject matter. At the same time, if we wish to communicate the results of our researches in a way that can be understood by the general academic community, we must adhere to these procedures and templates.

With respect to Chinese proper names, I have applied the official *pinyin* transcription. In so doing, I have also followed the prevailing usage and placed Chinese family names before the given names. For those Chinese scholars (especially of the third generation of the Modern Confucian movement) who have published widely in English, I have kept their names in the form already familiar to Western readers.

Intercultural research necessarily involves translation, but this translation cannot be limited to a linguistic transfer, but must include the interpretation of specific textual/speech structures, categories, concepts and values existing in diverse socio-cultural contexts. In recent years, there has been a growing demand to revive the classic categories and concepts of traditional Chinese philosophy. This approach, however, requires the intercultural relativization of the contents based on methodologies that correspond to the specific requirements of research in the Chinese philosophical tradition, and comparative philosophy or cultural studies in general. The priority in this approach is preserving traditional Chinese philosophical characteristics and maintaining autochthonous and traditional methodological principles. However, this does not mean denying or excluding an intellectual confrontation with Western (and global) philosophical systems. Global (especially European and Indian) philosophy includes

numerous elements that cannot be found in the Chinese tradition. The investigation and application of these elements is not only a valuable means for fertilizing new idea systems, but also offers an important comparative tool for better understanding one's own tradition. At the same time, as the modern Chinese theorist Zhang Dainian cautioned, we must avoid the use of incompatible or incommensurable methods that attempt to study Chinese history through the lens of Western concepts and categories:

Different philosophical theories use different concepts and categories. Concepts and categories used in philosophical theories can differ greatly from one nation to another. (Zhang Dainian 2003, 118)

Chinese philosophy differs from European or Indian philosophy in many aspects. If we wish to establish a new Chinese philosophical tradition, we need to be familiar with its basic premises. If we attempt to systematize it through the use of European or Indian methodological approaches, its subtle essence will elude our understanding.

However, the methodological problems connected with understanding Chinese modernization, its ideologies and underlying ideas are not limited to philosophical and conceptual issues. The geopolitical aspect is equally important and when analyzing a socially relevant idea we must also take into account the economic and historical context within which it evolved. Modern Confucianism is no exception here, and in examining this philosophical current we must begin by recognizing the fact that the transnationalization of capital has also led to the universalization of capitalist production, which has thus become separated from its specifically European historical origins.

Given that Modern Confucians viewed modernization primarily as a rationalization of the world, they explored their own tradition for authentic concepts comparable to the two Western paradigms essential for modernization, i.e. the concepts of subjectivity, and of reason and rationality. Taking this as its point of departure, the book analyzes the central values of Confucianism, and interprets them in different Chinese and Taiwanese sociopolitical contexts in order to evaluate their impact upon prevailing contemporary ideologies. Among other issues, the book also examines the axiological differences within

modern East Asian societies, and focuses on Modern Confucian treatments of epistemological and ethical concepts that can serve as a foundation for a “Chinese” modernization theory. Of particular importance in this regard are the notions of moral self (*daode benxin*, *daode ziwo*), unlimited heart-mind (*wuxiande zhixin*) and intellectual intuition (*zhide zhijue*).

The notion that a so-called “vacuum of values” is responsible for the alienation of modern post-capitalist societies in the global world raises the question of whether this East Asian model is really capable of generating a non-individualistic version of modernity. In verifying this hypothesis, I tried to show that the purported relation between modernity and individualism, which international modernization theories have always viewed as “inevitable” or “intrinsic” is little more than an outcome of Western historical paradigms.

Despite its importance, this stream of thought is still little known in wider academic circles. Although many books and articles on this topic are available in Chinese, academic studies in Western languages are namely still few and far between. Because Modern Confucian efforts to revitalize and reconstruct traditional Confucian thought can be seen as an attempt to counter the dominant ideological trends and preserve Chinese cultural identity, the present study will also hopefully contribute to the development of theoretical dialogues between “China” and “Europe”.

I firmly believe that investigations in this stream of thought can tell us a great deal both about the times we live in and about the contemporary and future destiny of one of the most important philosophical legacies in the world. At the same time, I hope that the present book can also reveal the important role of the so-called “Non-Western” intellectual traditions in contemporary philosophical and cultural discourses.