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Scholar's Corner: Confucianism in and for the Modern World

The Need for Confucianism

Stephen C. Angle*

Readers of this journal are sure to be familiar with the scholarly debates over whether Confucianism can be, or even must be, made compatible with democracy. As valuable as these conversations are, they surely seem to privilege democracy—to make it, as Joseph Chan has complained, "the only game in town" (Angle et al 2018, 43). In this short essay, I propose to flip the implicit hierarchy upside down and ask instead whether contemporary Chinese political theory needs to be based on Confucian values. An answer to this question will depend on first clarifying what it means: At whom, exactly, is it addressed? What sort of "need" are we talking about? What is it to "base" theory on a set of values? I'll argue that there is a way of understanding the question that does lead to a plausible affirmative answer, though in pluralistic, modern Chinese societies, there are also many routes to negative or implausibly positive replies. Successfully navigating the terrain these responses describe is a key challenge to Chinese political theorists of any background.

Let's begin with the premise that the question is addressed to theorists in China and theorizing about all Chinese citizens. We could call this theorizing for China. The next preliminary issue is in what sense contemporary theories "need" to be based on Confucian values. This divides into two main possibilities. Perhaps, for some reason, we (for some "we") *must* base our contemporary theories on Confucianism; or perhaps it would be *valuable* for us to do so. I acknowledge that the most natural reading of "need" is the former,

* Stephen C. Angle is the Director of the Fries Center for Global Studies, Mansfield Freeman Professor of East Asian Studies, and Professor of Philosophy at Wesleyan University. E-mail: sangle@wesleyan.edu

but I believe that the reasons that have been offered for why theorists "must" base their work on Confucianism are highly implausible.

Beginning with the first reading of "need," the claim would be that Chinese theorists, as they theorize about politics applying to all Chinese citizens, must base their theories in Confucian values. One argument that has been made for such a conclusion is that the Chinese people can only survive if they re-embrace Confucianism—and so their theorists must use Confucian theories to describe and prescribe Chinese politics. A crucial premise of this argument is that "Chinese culture = Confucianism." Without Confucianism, there may still be people and a polity in the land around the Yellow River, but it will not be "Chinese." (Strictly speaking, they will not be 中国人, people of the Middle Kingdom.) But of course, this is a bad argument, relying on an essentialism about "Chinese culture" that is easy to see and reject.

A slightly better argument for "must" is that only a Confucian-based political theory *successfully* will be able to describe Chinese norms and prescribe Chinese political forms. The idea here is that Chinese society, as a matter of fact, is so deeply Confucian that theory based elsewhere will fail to "take root" in the Chinese (i.e., Confucian) "soil." The problem with such an assertion is that history seems to have already proven it wrong. No matter whether one chooses Chinese socialism or Taiwanese democracy, each seems pretty successful and not very Confucian. At the very least, neither is explicitly Confucian! If you ask about socialism "with Chinese characteristics," I reply that the "Chinese characteristics" have more to do with markets and free enterprise than with Confucianism. To be sure, there are ways in which Chinese socialism and Taiwanese democracy are distinctive, and some of this distinctiveness is probably related to these societies' Confucian heritage. Admitting this, though, is a long way from agreeing that political theories must be "based" on Confucianism in any significant way.

If we ask instead why it would *valuable* for Chinese theories to be based on Confucianism, we can see that there are a number of reasons to consider. The first is a weaker version of the idea just considered: instead of saying that only a Confucian-based theory

can succeed, we should consider whether a Confucian-based theory might be more successful, all else equal, than a theory without such a base. Sungmoon Kim has argued that the social lives of people throughout East Asia "are importantly encumbered by Confucian norms, habits, rituals, mores, or civilities, both positively and negatively, notwithstanding their increasing subscriptions to diverse moral and religious doctrines as private individuals" (Kim 2018, 192). In his various works Kim has drawn on modern South Korea to show ways in which legal and other decisions make more sense when we recognize the Confucian norms "encumbering" them. Basing (in some sense—see below) our theorizing on these norms is thus more likely to succeed, less likely to meet with confusion or to result in incoherence.

Other reasons for believing that basing modern theory on Confucianism can be valuable are less connected to the present norms of Chinese (or East Asian) people. It is plausible to think that a great intellectual tradition like Confucianism has within it important insights into the types of creatures humans are (or can be), the varieties of social organization most suited to us, and so on. A third reason—in addition to "success" and "insight"—is the value of preserving and reflecting on a diverse range of possibilities for humans. Writing about the importance of a rigorous historical approach to interpreting Chinese texts, Brook Ziporyn has spoken of the value of "safeguard[ing] the strangeness of the text" in just this vein (Ziporyn 2012, 13). Relatedly, there is value in taking seriously the views of theories whose origins lie outside the currently hegemonic cultures of so-called "Western civilization." It is obvious that power has distorted the institutions in and through which we create and disseminate knowledge, so post- or anti-colonial efforts to articulate theories with alternative bases are inherently valuable (Jenco 2016).

In short, there are four good reasons that provide at least some support for basing Chinese theories on Confucianism: success, insight, diversity, and anti-colonialism. What does it mean, though, to "base" a theory on Confucianism? The key here is to realize that there is no single, fixed set of practices that can be labelled as "Con-

fucianism." As many analysts have stressed, genuine traditions are characterized by internal diversity and rational (in the tradition's own terms) debate (Shils 1981; MacIntyre 1998; Nussbaum and Sen 1989). As one puts it: "A tradition of enquiry is more than a coherent movement of thought. It is such a movement in the course of which those engaging in the movement become aware of it and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and carry its enquiries forward" (MacIntyre 1998, 326).

There is ample evidence that modern Confucians are engaged in just such a project. As one of the most influential twentieth-century Confucians, Feng Youlan (1895-1990) put it, modern Confucians can and must "continue" the tradition rather than just "follow" it (Feng 2001, 4). "Following" past versions of the tradition would mean rigidly adhering to interpretations of the tradition from hundreds or even thousands of years ago. This kind of fetishizing of the past is almost always driven by extremist and ideological contemporary motives, and is also based on the false premises that (1) some earlier iteration of the tradition was pure, while more recent versions are mere interpretations; and (2) we have unmitigated access to this earlier, pure moment. Like many other traditions, Confucianism today has its "fundamentalists," but their claims to be able to speak for an original Confucianism are deeply problematic (Angle 2014).

Instead of claiming to be able to directly mirror a non-existent "pure" Confucian past, therefore, basing modern theories on Confucianism inevitably involves careful argument about which values and ideas are most important and about how those values and ideas can best be realized in the present day. Rigorous historical scholarship can be part of this process—keeping in mind Ziporyn's remark about "safeguarding strangeness"—but ultimately this cannot simply be about the interpretation of past texts. The texts are themselves diverse, making arguments with varying degrees of coherence. Basing modern theory on Confucianism therefore must be a philosophical project of "continuing" the tradition.

I have been arguing that in the context of modern China, there are plausible reasons to think that basing political theory on Confucianism is valuable. We should also recognize the potential pitfalls

of such an approach. As I move towards my conclusion, let me briefly consider four such worries. First is the concern that Confucians both historically and in the modern era have shown themselves to be too quick to compromise with unscrupulous powerholders and too willing to support authoritarianism (O'Dwyer 2019). In part this has to do with the traditional and present-day absences of independent bases of institutional power, which makes it too easy for Confucians to be coopted (De Bary 1991).[1] These are complicated issues well beyond the scope of this short essay to address, but suffice it to say that for Confucianism to be valuable as a base for modern Chinese theory, this question needs to be carefully addressed.

A second concern is that basing modern theory on a tradition like Confucianism is a poor choice for modern, progressive-minded thinkers because it plays to the strengths of conservatives. Kurzman has identified this as a problem for Islamic thinkers who try to meet traditionalists on their own turf but then show that the Islamic canon ought to be understood in a liberal way (Kurzman 1998). Similarly, it might be thought that conservatives are inevitably privileged when it comes to tradition-based arguments. Joseph Chan has one of the best responses to this kind of worry: shall we just leave it up to the would-be dictators to say what Confucianism can mean today? (Chan 1995) I would add that it is far from obvious, once one looks at the details, that conservative arguments really are better. As soon as one acknowledges that traditions can and should develop in response to new reasoning and new situations—a recognition built-in to Confucianism, as I have argued in many places—then we can begin judging competing positions on their merits.

My reference to looking "at the details," though, brings me to a third concern: are detailed textual arguments really the strongest weapons in the arsenal of liberal- or progressive-minded Chinese intellectuals? Aren't these technical arguments less convincing than straight-forward appeals to values like autonomy or equality? (Jiang

[1] Jiang Qing's proposal for a Confucian "Academy" modelled on the Iranian Council of Guardians is hardly an improvement; as in Iran, Jiang's Academy it seems likely to just be another source of unaccountable, arbitrary power (Jiang 2013).

2018) In response, I suggest two points. (1) In the context of a broad and pluralistic debate about political values, it is surely a contribution to undermine the unanimity or obviousness of conservative Confucian claims. If we can simply show that the internal foundation of such claims is shaky, we may help to convince an audience to take them less seriously. (2) There is no reason that a progressive Confucian must confine him or herself to technical, textual arguments. Many Confucian arguments are broadly accessible and powerful—and furthermore are couched in language (like harmony or humaneness) that is likely to resonate with Chinese audiences.

A final objection to the value of using Confucian-based political theory in China runs something like this: in light of tragedies like the Cultural Revolution and the current rise of political repression, what China needs more than anything is whichever theory gives the strongest argument against tyranny and for the protection of the individual. Maybe a progressive Confucianism can generate such arguments, the objector may concede, but they simply are not as straight-forward as those of classical liberalism—and so, whatever values might accrue to Confucian-based theories are outweighed in the present context. I confess to feeling the pull of an argument like this. I am not sure, though, that all theorists must sing the same note in order to produce a powerful theoretical chorus. Instead of simply ignoring the values of diversity, anti-colonialism, and so on that I sketched earlier, liberals can collaborate with progressive Confucians on key issues. It is too strong to say that Chinese political theory today "must" be based on Confucian values, but even in light of the concerns that I have canvassed, I believe Confucian-based theories continue to be vital in today's China.

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