Defending Constitutional Democracy on Confucian Terms: *Progressive Confucianism and Its Debate with Traditionalist Confucianism in Contemporary China*

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, a growing number of "traditionalist Confucians" in Mainland China have been using Confucianism to justify authoritarian political arrangements as alternatives to constitutional democracy. In the face of this challenge, "progressive Confucians" argue that they can provide authentic Confucian justifications for constitutional democracy, and can counter traditionalist Confucians purely on Confucian terms by providing better interpretations of the Confucian tradition. This article argues that progressive Confucians may not be able to win the debate with their traditionalist rivals because they cannot defend their interpretations of Confucian texts as superior to rival interpretations, and because an endless debate on Confucian interpretation unwittingly diverts social critics' attention from more urgent political issues in China, most notably political oppression. A better strategy, I argue, is for progressive Confucians to step out of the interpretive debate with the traditionalists and provide extra-Confucian reasons about the need to establish a constitutional democracy in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Progressive confucianism, traditionalist confucianism, constitutional democracy, authoritarianism, China

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I. Introduction

Confucianism has been strongly revived in contemporary China. Among intellectuals who invoke Confucianism to intervene into political debates in the Chinese context, two groups of Confucians stand out as providing important normative ideals for China's political future. On the one hand, progressive Confucians aim to develop the egalitarian and democratic potential of Confucianism and marry this reconfigured ancient tradition with constitutional democracy. On the other hand, traditionalist Confucians, by revitalizing the inegalitarian dimensions of Confucianism, attempt to criticize the alleged "universal values," or even "foreign ideals," of constitutional democracy and justify strongly hierarchical political arrangements. Although these two camps pursue diametrically different political agendas in the Chinese context, they both maintain this dispute as an intra-Confucian debate based upon complicated interpretations of Confucian texts. In particular, progressive Confucians aim to counter their rivals by demonstrating that progressive interpretations of Confucianism are superior to those offered by traditionalist Confucians, and that an authentic Confucianism they present has no reason not to embrace a constitutional democracy.

In this article, I aim to show that progressive Confucians' strategy in countering traditionalist Confucianism is wrongheaded because their obsession with an authentic interpretation of Confucianism unwittingly diverts their attention away from a more important and urgent normative issue facing China today: Why must constitutional democracy be established in China in the first place? I also argue that they may fail to win the debate with traditionalist Confucians, because they are unable to defend their interpretations of Confucianism as superior to rival interpretations, given the fact that the Confucian tradition yields multiple plausible interpretations due to its richness.

To illustrate my arguments, I focus on Stephen Angle's political theory, a leading representative of progressive Confucianism, and elaborate on his methodology in conducting social criticism, his interpretation of the Confucian tradition, and his justification for

constitutional democracy on Confucian grounds. I also reconstruct the arguments provided by Jiang Qing and his followers (such as Zeng Yi), who are widely regarded as intellectual leaders of traditionalist Confucianism in Mainland China, in order to show that they present an interpretation of Confucianism that is no less plausible than Angle's, thereby invalidating Angle's claim that progressive Confucianism is the most authentic version of Confucianism in our own age. This comparison between Angle and Jiang is meant to show that progressive Confucianism, despite its impressive work on reconfiguring Confucian resources for democratic purposes, neglects to substantiate the normative attractiveness of constitutional democracy, which originates from the modern West, in the Chinese context. In particular, by one-sidedly focusing on demonstrating the Confucian pedigree of his theory and rejecting the traditionalist interpretation of Confucianism, Angle fails to offer powerful antecedent reasons as to why constitutional democracy is good for the Chinese people, and why the best choice for Confucianism in contemporary China is to embrace democratic values and institutions, rather than restoring its hierarchical dimensions. If the most pressing political issue in the Chinese context is to establish the desirability of constitutional democracy, I suggest that progressive Confucians step out of the interpretive debate with the traditionalists and engage directly with the justification for constitutional democracy and its supporting values and institutions, such as political equality, civil and political rights, and democratic elections and deliberations.

The debate between progressive and traditionalist Confucianisms deserves special attention because among all versions of contemporary Confucianism, traditionalist Confucianism has most radically challenged the desirability of constitutional democracy in Mainland China and repeatedly asked the authoritarian Party-state to act on their behalf. Although the Confucian doctrines they promote are in tension with the Marxism nominally upheld by the Communist Party, they have made it very explicit that the best way to revive Confucianism is for the authoritarian state to adopt it as an official ideology (Jiang and O'Dwyer 2019). This willingness to ingratiate

themselves with the Party-state resonates with the Party's attempt to incorporate Confucian and quasi-Confucian discourses to overcome its legitimacy deficit, as has been observed by many scholars (Billioud and Storey 2007; Meissner 2006). Countering traditionalist Confucianism, therefore, is of utmost importance for anyone who cares about the fate of constitutional democracy in a future China.

This intervention in the progressive-traditionalist debate within Confucianism also has a broader implication. In 1987, Michael Walzer famously advanced the idea that the best model for progressive social criticism is what he calls "connected social criticism." In this model, the social critic should try to justify progressive values by mobilizing existing resources in the local culture, such as social values and foundational texts, rather than starting from foreign ideas or abstract philosophical principles (Walzer 1987). The best social criticism for Walzer is hence a game of interpretation, in which the social critic challenges the ruling power by reinterpreting the canons honored by the entire society in a progressive manner. Progressive Confucianism bears close similarities to connected social criticism. Therefore, by analyzing Angle's debate with traditionalist Confucianism, this article also aims to show the limits of Walzer's model: although progressive Confucianism can provide a normatively attractive version of Confucianism in modern China, it is doubtful whether it can defeat traditionalist Confucianism without resorting to important extra-Confucian arguments. Strategically speaking, therefore, progressive Confucians would counter their rivals more effectively if they set aside the model of connected social criticism and engage traditionalist arguments on extra-Confucian grounds.

II. Progressive Confucianism vs. Traditionalist Confucianism: Setting the Stage

The disastrous Cultural Revolution stimulated Chinese intellectuals to thoroughly reflect upon the desirability of communist ideals and Leninist practices. In the 1980s, the dominant intellectual atmosphere in China was a promotion of values and institutions such as the

rule of law, constitutionalism, human rights, and representative democracy. However, more moderate advocates of these principles were also curious about how China's traditions, despite the Maoist dismissal of them as feudal and reactionary ideologies, could provide positive intellectual resources for China's modernization and give these modern political values and institutions concrete Chinese characteristics. When Mainland China was under the rule of Mao, some Sinophone scholars outside, who labeled themselves contemporary New Confucians, developed various theories about the compatibility between Confucianism and constitutional democracy. Immediately after the Reform and Opening Up in early 1980s, these "overseas" Confucian philosophies were imported back to the Mainland. Works written by twentieth-century Confucians such as Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan were widely circulated among Chinese intellectuals. The political debate in the 1980s was by and large between liberals who regarded Confucianism as a cultural obstacle to constitutional democracy and moderate Confucians who argued that a modernized Confucianism could provide indigenous support for constitutional democracy.

Stephen Angle, among others, is the twenty-first-century successor of Overseas New Confucianism (hereafter ONC) in contemporary political theory. Inspired by Mou Zongsan's philosophy, Angle has provided one of the most theoretically cogent and philosophically rigorous versions of Confucian political theory that aims to justify the compatibility between Confucian ethics and constitutional democracy (Angle 2012). This "Progressive Confucianism,"[1] as Angle calls it, attempts to demonstrate the possibility of decoupling the philosophical basis of constitutional democracy (such as personal autonomy and popular sovereignty) from democratic institutions and marrying the latter with purely Confucian philosophical justifications. This particular strategy gives his defense of constitutional democracy

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[1] In this article, I distinguish between "progressive Confucianism" (small p) and "Progressive Confucianism" (capital P). The former refers to other Confucians who share progressive views with Angle, while the latter exclusively denotes Angle's particular philosophy of Progressive Confucianism.

significant Chinese characteristics and thereby avoids the common accusation that advocating democracy's universal purchase only manifests Eurocentric cultural imperialism.[2]

Unlike in the 1980s and early 1990s, however, in the twenty-first century the popularity of ONC has gradually faded away, as a new group of Confucians have risen and started to challenge the assumptions, approaches, and concrete arguments of ONC, including Angle's Progressive Confucianism. Widely known as "Mainland New Confucians" (hereafter MNC), these intellectuals complain that ONCs have one-sidedly focused on providing Confucian justifications for constitutional democracy while ignoring Confucianism's ability to invent political institutions that are different from, and even superior to, this "Western" regime type. They thus label themselves "political Confucians" in order to emphasize their special interest in institutional design for a future China and future world, inspired by the ancient wisdom of Confucianism.

The scholar who initiated this new intellectual trend is Jiang Qing. According to Daniel A. Bell, who introduced Jiang's work to Anglophone political theory circles, "[i]t may not be an exaggeration to say that Jiang Qing has almost single-handedly succeeded in enriching debates about China's political future" (Bell 2013, 1). Originally a follower of ONC, Jiang from 1989 started to argue that Confucianism and constitutional democracy were not compatible, as the latter was imposed by Western forces who had no respect for

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[2] Joseph Chan's theory of Confucian perfectionism also bears some similarities with Angle's Progressive Confucianism. Both of them attempt to decouple the philosophical basis of constitutional democracy from democratic institutions and marry the latter with Confucian philosophical justifications (Chan 2014a, 1-23). However, in addition to justifying electoral democracy upon Confucian ideals, Chan also argues that a second chamber in the legislature selected by peer and performance review should be established in a constitutional regime in order to balance the democratically elected lower house (81-110). This regime combines meritocracy with democracy and is different from Angle's idea that the Confucian theory of moral development justifies a more participatory form of democracy. Due to this difference, I do not discuss Chan's theory together with Angle's Progressive Confucianism, although his Confucian perfectionism is in line with many themes developed by Angle. Both wish China to adopt a constitutional democracy in the future, regardless of what concrete institutions this regime should include.

China's particular culture and history. By drawing on insights from *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, Jiang is famous for his promotion of the "tricameral system" that reflects the idea of Confucian triple legitimacy that he draws from the Gongyang text—the Heavenly Mandate, historical and cultural continuity, and the will of the people (Jiang 2013, 28). In his proposal, the House of Ru (Tongruyuan 通儒院), composed of Confucian scholars selected by nomination, examination, and recommendation, shall represent the Sacred Mandate. The House of the Nation (Guotiyuan 国体院), composed of descendants of Confucius and ancient sages, representatives from different religions, and other contemporary worthy people, shall represent historical and cultural legitimacy. Finally, the House of the People (Shuminyuan 庶民院) shall resemble Western democratic parliaments and represent popular will (Jiang 2013, 41-42). To further guarantee the Confucian pedigree of this regime, Jiang also proposes a supervisory Confucian Academy composed of renowned Confucian scholars that is akin to the Guardian Council in Iran. This Academy is empowered as the ultimate guardian of Confucianism as an established state religion (44-70).

Jiang's theory has been criticized as being "fundamentalist, coercive, dogmatic, impractical, and out of touch with contemporary realities" (Angle 2018a, 87), but these attacks do not stop his ideas from being accepted and developed by his intellectual followers. In the 2010s, younger scholars such as Zeng Yi and Guo Xiaodong joined Jiang's camp. Although they do not enthusiastically promote Jiang's particular institutional proposal, they share his idea that the Gongyang strand in Confucianism is crucial for contemporary thinkers to invent and defend distinctively Confucian and Chinese political and social institutions. Zeng Yi, for example, rejects the ideal of "universal values" such as political equality and democracy and argues for a rebuilding of social hierarchy—including traditional gender hierarchy—in contemporary China (Zeng and Guo 2014). He claims that ONCs mistakenly believe that "traditional [Confucian] political thought lacked any fruitful contribution in terms of political institutions" and that they lack "the proper respect for the ancients' political, legal, and societal structures" (Zeng and Fang 2018, 115). In

terms of concrete institutional design, Zeng insists that Confucians must actively defend the Communist Party regime while gently persuading the Party-state to adopt laws, rituals, and institutions that embody core Confucian values (Zeng and Zhang 2015). In his most recent book, Zeng argues that Confucian scholars must seek to actively translate the ethical principles and rituals prescribed in Confucian canons into concrete legal practices in the real world and in so doing acquire the power and authority to rule the secular world in a way similar to the Islamic Ulama (Zeng 2018, iii-iv). This idea that Confucianism should regain its comprehensive domination over the entire society is in line with Jiang's political theory.

The Gongyang School represented by Jiang Qing and Zeng Yi does not exhaust the category of MNC. Along with the growth and diversification of this group, both Jiang's institutional design and his reliance upon Gongyang learning have been criticized by other political Confucians, many of whom are friendlier toward modern constitutional democracy (Angle 2018a, 95). Tongdong Bai, for example, honors the trailblazing role of Jiang but dismisses his theory as an "unrealistic utopia" (Bai 2010). He also proposes a "Confucian hybrid regime" that mixes electoral democracy with a legislative upper chamber selected by examination, expertise, and peer and performance review (Bai 2020, 72-79). To distinguish the Gongyang School from other MNCs, I call scholars like Jiang Qing and Zeng Yi "traditionalist Confucians." This label puts emphasis on their militant critique of modernity and constitutional democracy as well as their enthusiasm in promoting a comprehensive revival of Confucian practices based on their unwavering attachment to and special interpretations of the Gongyang strand. Compared with other MNCs, traditionalist Confucians pose the greatest threat to ONC and progressive Confucianism precisely because their reactionary impulse challenges the most basic values and institutions of a constitutional democracy, including political equality, the rule of law, the protection of civil and political rights, and the separation of religion and state, to which other MNCs do not thoroughly object.[3]

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[3] Take Tongdong Bai as an example again: although naming his book as "Against

Stephen Angle, among other ONCs, has most sensitively realized that this wave of anti-democratic thought must be combated. He continuously follows the development of traditionalist Confucianism in Mainland China and argues against their reactionary endeavors (Angle 2018a). What makes Angle's strategy particularly interesting and worth examining is his firm conviction that these traditionalists should be defeated purely on Confucian, rather than liberal democratic terms. In a roundtable discussion on "the future of Confucian political philosophy" at the University of Hong Kong in 2017, Angle emphasized that the most urgent task for progressive Confucians in the Chinese context was to offer a third choice beyond "traditionalist Confucianism" and "out-and-out liberal[ism]" (Angle 2018b, 49). He also suggested that those who call themselves "liberal Confucians" in China should drop this label and use "progressive Confucianism" in order to demonstrate their faithfulness to Confucianism and deflect the critique that they are merely promoting a Confucian version of liberalism (Angle 2019). In order to make progressive Confucianism relevant to ordinary people, Angle argues that progressive Confucians should also actively "engag[e] with concrete issues, in society, in our local societies that are timely and argu[e] from a specifically Confucian standpoint to a progressive critique or a progressive end" (Angle 2018b, 49).

Angle's claim that excavating Confucianism's progressive potential is better than straightforwardly asserting liberal democratic commitments, as liberals always do, invites us to examine whether

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Political Equality," Bai firmly believes that one person, one vote should be preserved as the proper way to select lawmakers in the lower house. He also argues that the rule of law and the protection of civil and political rights, especially free speech, should be strongly upheld (Bai 2020, 68). This moderate position regarding constitutional democracy makes Bai's position closer to Joseph Chan's than to Jiang Qing's. Another example is Gan Chunsong, who suggests that Confucianism is compatible with Schumpeter's elitist conception of democracy, in which ordinary people can select, sanction, and delegate powers to competent elites in periodic elections (Gan 2012). Chen Ming, another leading MNC, is sympathetic to Jiang's idea that Confucianism should play a more religious role in contemporary China, but argues that Confucianism should serve as a "civil religion," rather than a state religion (Angle 2018a, 68, 90).

his strategy can effectively counter traditionalist Confucians, as discussed below.

III. Stephen Angle's Progressive Confucian Political Philosophy

A. Cross-cultural Engagement and Connected Social Criticism

Over the past two decades, Angle has developed a systematic theory of progressive Confucianism that justifies modern political values such as political equality, the rule of law, constitutionalism, and democratic participation purely on Confucian resources, and he repeatedly claims that his reconstruction of Confucianism is authentic to the Confucian spirit. The primary motivation for Angle to defend progressive principles on Confucian terms is his conviction that universalist discourses of philosophy and social criticism risk becoming cultural imperialism, i.e., the universalization of one particular cultural tradition (Angle 2010, 6). Even if we can avoid this danger and craft a minimalist set of universal criteria for cross-cultural criticism, Angle argues, we can only defend very thin, vague, and general values and "criticize egregious moral violations on the part of others" without providing a "full-fledged criticism" of a community's values and practices (Angle 2002, 13-15). In addition, the endeavor to find minimalist, universalist standards across culture tends to regard cultures as separate and homogenous entities and treat common standards as a set of static values that can withstand change. However, since Angle regards and admires each culture as a heterogeneous complex in which change and contestation take place from time to time, he believes that a dynamic and open-ended strategy of cross-cultural dialogue is more appropriate to the dynamic nature of culture. As he claims in *Human Rights and Chinese Thought* (hereafter *HRCT*), "recognition of the internal complexity of cultures and traditions must be central to a successful account of cross-cultural dialogue; these complexities can make dialogue more difficult, but they also can give us one of the keys to fruitful dialogue"

(Angle 2002, 17).

Per Angle, therefore, when a foreigner encounters a given society and wants to criticize its values effectively, she can exploit the internal disagreement within that tradition, build alliance with a certain strand that is friendly to the critic's own convictions, and criticize that society purely on its own terms (Angle 2002, 69-72). In the Chinese context, for example, if a certain strand of Confucianism is more receptive to the ideas of human rights originated in the Western tradition, then a social critic can rely on this strand and justify human rights on Confucian terms.

Angle, like Walzer, firmly believes that an effective social criticism in China must closely engage with the entire Confucian tradition and rely on intricate interpretations and reconstructions to make Confucianism compatible with human rights and constitutional democracy. This approach of cross-cultural engagement also accounts for Angle's emphasis that his theory is an authentic "Confucian" philosophy, rather than an eclectic theory that arbitrarily mixes Confucian values and liberal democratic commitments. As I have mentioned in the last section, maintaining the Confucian pedigree and distancing himself from liberalism and other non-Confucian commitments are the hallmarks of Angle's Progressive Confucianism. For example, in *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (hereafter *CCPP*), in which he most systematically elaborates his own normative political theory, Angle argues that "'Progressive Confucianism' bears certain similarities to other contemporary 'progressive' social and political movements" and that "some contemporary Confucians are mistaken in not adopting these progressive values and institutions" (Angle 2012, 2). He attempts to justify his positions "as good Confucianism" and challenge "the Confucian legitimacy of others' positions" (8), including the positions of Jiang Qing, Daniel A. Bell, and other self-identified Confucians who advocate more authoritarian political arrangements. In doing so, Angle aims to show that their theories are not faithful to the Confucian tradition, either because they interpret Confucianism in a wrong way, or because they incorporate foreign thought on extra-Confucian grounds. This emphasis on "Confucian legitimacy"

indicates his attempt to maintain his debate with traditionalist Con-
fucians as an intra-Confucian debate and to defeat his rivals purely
on Confucian terms.

B. Neo-Confucianism as the Starting Point for Progressive
   Confucianism

To demonstrate the Confucian pedigree of his Progressive Confu-
cianism, Angle compares different strands within the Confucian
tradition and sides with those most favorable to modern progressive
values and institutions. According to his narrative of the intellectual
development of Confucianism, although the idea of moral equality
was present in classical Confucianism (represented by the Five Clas-
sics, the *Analects, Mencius*, and *Xunzi*), especially in *Mencius*, it is later
strands of Confucianism that developed this idea to a fuller extent,
thus making them more receptive to modern progressive principles.[4]
Therefore, instead of focusing on reinterpreting and reconstructing
classical Confucianism, as most contemporary Confucians are doing
(Angle calls them "Neo-Classical Confucians"), Angle suggests that it
is more promising to build a Confucian justification for progressive
principles upon later strands of Confucianism.

In *HRCT*, for example, Angle offers two reasons as to why the
attempt to derive human rights from classical Confucianism fails to
provide robust contemporary Confucian theories of human rights.
First, this attempt does not do justice to the complexity and dynamic
nature of the Confucian tradition. According to him, "There are no
classical Confucians alive today, nor have there been for centuries. If

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[4] In a private correspondence with me Angle argues that on certain issues, such as
gender, classical Confucian thinkers may be more "progressive" than Neo-Confucians
in most cases, therefore opening the possibility to build a Confucian justification for
gender equality upon early Confucianism. I agree with Angle that this may be right.
However, my reading of Angle's works, as presented in this article, suggests that he has
focused more on defending the idea that later strands of Confucianism are a better
starting point for justifying a *constitutional democracy* in his Progressive Confucianism.
As I will discuss below, Angle explicitly thinks that Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism is a
better basis for defending equal political participation, and even a participatory form
of democracy.

the question of whether Chinese culture is compatible with human rights is to be relevant, we need to look to more recent Chinese culture, in all its complexity." Second, this attempt also leads to loose interpretations of not only Confucian texts but also ideas of rights. For Angle, "[r]ights have a distinctive conceptual structure that sets them apart from other moral commitments, like duties or ideals." Although it is possible to find ideas in the *Analects* that resonate with some statements in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "this is very different from finding 'rights' in the *Analects*" (Angle 2002, 21). Similar concerns are also expressed in *CCPP*. Commenting on Tongdong Bai's idea that the *Mencius* can be interpreted as supporting popular sovereignty, Angle argues that a careful reading of the *Mencius* indicates that for classical Confucianism, the people are no more than "a mere reactive mass, incapable of agency" in exercising political decision (Angle 2012, 40). He thus claims that Bai's theory, along with many other attempts to derive progressive values directly from classical Confucianism, cannot avoid the charge of "a certain kind of ahistoricism" (15).

To prevent interpreting classical Confucian texts loosely and to show that Confucianism as a dynamic tradition has evolved progressively even before its encounter with Western thought, Angle uses later Confucian strands as the ground to justify human rights, political equality, and constitutional democracy. In *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (hereafter *Sagehood*), the strand that Angle relies upon to develop his own political philosophy is Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism represented by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529). In Chinese intellectual history, the Neo-Confucian tradition was indeed one, if not the most, powerful strand from the tenth to the nineteenth century. It was endorsed by leading intellectuals in these centuries and canonized by the state as the authoritative interpretation of classical Confucianism (Angle 2010, 3-5). From Angle's perspective, if he could justify progressive principles by resorting to Neo-Confucian arguments, his theory would be legitimized as an authentic Confucian political philosophy in our own time. In *CCPP*, Angle argues that his approach is superior because he "follows the tradition's own

development more closely," whereas other scholars fail to appreciate the changing and multilayered nature of the Confucian tradition (Angle 2012, 49). Therefore, Angle seems to claim that since Neo-Confucianism has largely superseded classical and medieval Confucianism, we'd better start our own political thinking from this more up-to-date version of Confucianism.

Moreover, another reason that Neo-Confucianism is a better starting point is that its theoretical core is friendlier to some modern values to which we are allegiant. As Angle points out in *Sagehood*, the Neo-Confucian idea of sagehood is attractive to modern people because its content has a significantly egalitarian characteristic. Per Angle's narrative, sagehood is the central normative ideal in the entire Confucian tradition, but in its early periods, sagehood is marked by its elusiveness and inaccessibility to the common people. According to classical Confucians, including Confucius and Mencius, "sagehood becomes linked with creativity, political authority, keen perception, and most fundamentally, moral virtue" (Angle 2010, 14). Although Mencius explicitly claims that all men are capable of becoming a Yao or a Shun (*Mencius* VI.B.2), most other classical thinkers closely associated sages with the exercise of political authority, thus making the ideal of sagehood inaccessible to most people (14-15). According to Confucian exegetes from Han to Tang dynasties (second century BC to tenth century AD), "sagehood became such a high, mysterious state that they argued it was not accessible, even in principle, to most people" (16). Since the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the tenth century, however, the idea of sagehood had become increasingly egalitarian. From Zhu Xi onward, "the strong tendency [of the idea of sagehood] is to focus on the moral aspects of sagehood, and in particular, on its tie to virtue" (18). When it came to Wang Yangming in the fifteenth century, sagehood became almost totally disconnected from political authority and mysterious features. On this basis, Wang even claimed that "the people filling the street are all sages" (19). This is not to say that all ordinary people are already sages, but that sagehood is accessible to all, if they are determined to cultivate their virtues in accordance with a correct path of self-education. As shown below, this egalitarian ideal of sagehood serves as Angle's starting point for

justifying political equality and constitutional democracy.

C. Confucian Justification for Constitutional Democracy

According to Angle's narrative of the development of Confucianism reconstructed above, although sagehood constitutes the core ideal of the Confucian tradition through and through, the moral equality and accessibility of sagehood were not mainstream until the rise of Neo-Confucianism. If egalitarianism is a constitutive part of modern progressive values, Angle suggests, then progressives in contemporary China should celebrate this intellectual development within Confucianism and try to further develop this tradition to justify democratic political arrangements. This is the most difficult task for Angle, not because it is difficult to find compatibilities between Neo-Confucianism and democratic values, but because it is difficult to demonstrate that a Confucianism supporting democratic institutions is still an authentic Confucian theory, rather than a mere fusion of Confucian and foreign traditions, as the traditionalists may contend. This authenticity issue is a central concern in Angle's Progressive Confucianism precisely because in premodern China, even the most egalitarian version of Neo-Confucianism such as Wang Yangming's supported a monarchical, hierarchical, and elitist political structure. Therefore, Angle has to demonstrate that an embrace of constitutional democracy is merely an internal revision, not a radical overhaul, of Confucianism.

In *CCPP*, an existing approach of marrying Confucianism with constitutional democracy that Angle finds inferior to his Progressive Confucianism is what he calls "Synthetic Confucianism." According to his definition, Synthetic Confucians are "Confucian philosophers who draw centrally on non-Confucian philosophical traditions. These individuals may identify with multiple traditions, seeing value and significance from multiple perspectives, and seek to integrate these in one synthetic form of Confucianism" (Angle 2012, 16). For Angle, one major motivation for Synthetic Confucians to use this approach is that they have "an antecedent, independent commitment to the other doctrines with which Confucianism is

being synthesized" (16). Bell's bicameral meritocracy, for example, fits into the category of Synthetic Confucianism, as he "is seeking a way to combine democratic and Confucian values, and assumes an independent commitment to each" (53). In Angle's view, while Bell regards his meritocratically selected upper house as a Confucian institution, he justifies the need for a democratic lower house not on Confucian grounds, but on the "profound need to institutionalize the democratic virtues of accountability, transparency, and equal political participation" (Angle 2012, 53; Bell 2006, 160-161). This "dual commitment" to Confucianism and democracy is something that Angle wants to avoid, as he aims to justify constitutional democracy "from the internal logic of Progressive Confucianism" instead of an independent commitment to democratic principles (Angle 2012, 32).

To achieve this goal, Angle adopts a strategy to distinguish be-tween essential and non-essential parts of the Confucian tradition, and argues that Confucianism is in essence an ethical teaching of moral development, rather than a political doctrine aiming to justify authoritarian rule. According to Angle in the *CCPP*, even though the Confucian tradition is so dynamic that we can only say "Con-fucianisms" instead of "Confucianism," there is still a "core" behind this tradition: "this core should be centered around the ideal of all individuals developing their capacities for virtue—ultimately aiming at sagehood—through their relationships with one another and with their environment" (Angle 2012, 1-2). This implies that, for Angle, traditional political structures and institutions, such as monarchy and social hierarchy, which Confucianism has supported for mil-lennia, are not essential to the Confucian tradition, and if these structures and institutions impede equal moral development in a political community, then a faithful Confucian should even criticize them and seek for political arrangements that are better able to realize the essential ethical ideal.

To support this conception of the relationship between ethics and politics in Confucianism, Angle draws upon important intellectual resources from Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), a second-generational leader of ONC who not only relies heavily on Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism but also incorporates Kant's and Hegel's philosophy.

According to Mou, "[t]raditional Confucianism conceived of the ethical and political realm as continuous and unified. Either the most virtuous should rule or, in a concession to hereditary monarchy, rulers should strive to be as virtuous as possible and be guided by their still-more-virtuous ministers" (Angle 2012, 24). Mou, however, thinks that this extrapolation from morality (that all should strive to become sages) to politics (that the sage should rule) is wrong, because according to Neo-Confucianism, "achieving sagehood is an endless process," and empirically speaking no one can become a real sage in his life span. But China's imperial regime, which endows the supreme leader with unaccountable power, constantly gives tyrants who pretend to be sages the opportunity to "impose their vision of morality on the realm, with bloody consequences" (24). Once this political oppression happens, no other people can have the opportunity to actualize their equal moral potential to become sages anymore.

To prevent this periodical tragedy from happening again while retaining the Neo-Confucian commitment to sagehood, Mou borrows Hegel's dialectics and argues that Confucian ethics should undertake a "self-restriction" or "self-negation" (*ziwo kanxian*) to create an independent political space for people to cultivate their virtues without being impeded and oppressed by the tyrant. In this political domain, the system of laws and rights, rather than the arbitrary will of the ruler, shall prevail. As Angle summarizes, in Mou's theory, "[e]thical reasoning 'restricts itself' in order to more fully realize itself, and thereby allows for an independent realm of political value to exist" (Angle 2012, 28). This theory of "self-restriction" enables Mou and Angle to say that the imperial regime in ancient China is an unfortunate deviation from the Confucian core, and that it is a mistake for all preceding Confucians to support authoritarian forms of government. The regime that better serves the sagehood ideal, according to Mou and Angle, is constitutional democracy, a political regime based upon the rule of law, civil and political rights, and democratic procedures. Thus, Angle concludes that "[t]he institutions advocated by Progressive Confucians are valued not because of their ancient pedigree but because of their capacity to assist in the realization of the fundamental human virtues

that Confucians have valued since ancient times. Social structures that set barriers to the realization of virtue, therefore, need to be critiqued and changed" (18).

In sum, pressured by potential challenges that he is using external, and by and large Western liberal democratic standards to reconstruct Confucianism, Angle constantly demonstrates that he is merely following "the tradition's own development" (Angle 2012, 49), and that "to whatever degree Progressive Confucianism converges with Western models. . . this follows from the internal logic of Progressive Confucianism, not from a desire to copy the West" (32). He accuses Neo-Classical Confucians of ignoring the dynamic nature of Confucianism, and Synthetic Confucians of diluting the purity of their commitments to Confucianism. Based on his strategy of cross-cultural engagement, Angle believes that he can use his Progressive Confucianism to defeat traditionalists like Jiang Qing purely on Confucian terms. In the next section, I will put Angle and traditionalists into dialogue and argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, for Angle to demonstrate that traditionalist Confucians are not authentic Confucians.

IV. Traditional Confucianism's Rebuttal

In a brief review of Angle's Progressive Confucianism, Leigh Jenco argues that while Angle, among other Confucians, is a philosopher most sensitive to the diverse and changeable nature of Confucianism, and consciously refrains from using external, especially modern Western standard to evaluate Confucianism, he remains trapped by "particular kinds of power relationships which sustain and transform Confucianism over time and space. . . . Confucianism in his analysis is figured as relevant and 'modern' only to the extent that it can accommodate the values of some form of liberal democracy" (Jenco 2017, 454-455). Jenco thus urges scholars to rectify this power relationship and restore Confucianism as an independent source of knowledge-production in the modern academy. She also suggests that the values Confucianism offers independently can be critical of

liberal democratic ideas and practices (Jenco 2015, 662).

Traditionalist Confucians may agree with Jenco's critique of Angle, and what they want to contribute to the modern world is precisely values and institutions that are highly critical of constitutional democracy. Jiang Qing, for example, asserts that "[a] glance over China's current world of thought shows that Chinese people have already lost their ability to think independently about political questions. In other words, Chinese people are no longer able to use patterns of thought inherent in their own culture—Chinese culture— to think about China's current political development" (Jiang 2013, 27). In this section, I aim to prove that traditionalist Confucians can challenge Angle on three reasonable grounds: First, a closer reading of Neo-Confucianism shows that the pursuit of sagehood does not require a constitutional democracy. Therefore, Angle's commitment to this regime is non-Confucian. Second, Confucianism's continuous support of authoritarian regime in its history suggests that hierarchical political arrangements constitute the core and essential part of Confucianism, and the political dimension of the Confucian core is reflected in Gongyang learning. Third, in terms of "tradition's own development," the Gongyang School is also a powerful strand in late imperial China, and is equally qualified in serving as a starting point for constructing a contemporary Confucian political theory.[5]

A. Constitutional Democracy Is Not Logically Required by Neo-Confucianism

As shown above, the hallmark of traditionalist Confucians is their favor of hierarchical forms of political system in which Confucian

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[5] My suggestion that traditionalist Confucians can challenge Angle on three reasonable grounds does not imply that Jiang Qing's political philosophy, including triple legitimacy and the tricameral system, is philosophically cogent and defensible. David Elstein (2015) has provided one of the best systematic critiques of Jiang's thought, and I agree with him that Jiang's theory has many loopholes and inconsistencies. However, the fact that Jiang is a bad Gongyangist does not imply that a better Gongyangist cannot emerge in the future. Jiang's role in contemporary Chinese intellectual history is to serve as a trailblazer. His substantive views about the Confucian polity are not the final words in the Gongyang revival.

elites supposedly wield uncontestable power. They believe that pre-modern Confucians embraced monarchy and political hierarchy not without solid reasons and argue that these inegalitarian ideals remain attractive today. Because Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism is frequently employed by ONCs to support their progressive political vision, traditionalist Confucians tend to circumvent this strand and promote institutions based on other Confucian texts, most notably *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals.* However, I argue, on behalf of traditionalist Confucians, that even Neo-Confucianism is not a solid basis for justifying constitutional democracy on Confucian terms, and this is because for Neo-Confucians, moral self-cultivation can be achieved without the agent being involved in political activity.

As Angle correctly points out, Neo-Confucian thinkers made the ideal of sagehood accessible to ordinary people precisely because this ideal was thoroughly depoliticized. Unlike pre-Qin and early imperial Confucianism in which a sage was conceived of as a virtuous man wielding supreme political power, Neo-Confucianism emphasized the moral, rather than the political aspect of sagehood, and both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming made it explicit that no political involvement was necessary for moral self-cultivation (Angle 2010, 14-22). Most famously, as Angle himself cites in *Sagehood*, Wang Yangming argues that the only criterion for a person to become a sage is that "his mind has become completely identified with universal coherence (*chunhu tianli* 純乎天理) and is no longer mixed with any impurity or selfish human desires (*wurenyu zhiza* 无人欲之杂)." Political participations and political achievements, which Wang calls "the abilities of sages," are not essential for sagehood. "Therefore even an ordinary person, if he is willing to learn so as to enable his mind to become completely identified with universal coherence, can also become a sage, in the same way that although a one ounce piece [of pure gold], when compared to a 10,000 pound piece, is widely different in quantity, it is not deficient in perfection in quality" (Wang 1983, 119; cited from Angle 2010, 19). If Angle is faithful to this basic premise of Neo-Confucian conception of sagehood, then he should have recognized that participation in politics and government is not a requirement for

individual moral growth. In fact, Neo-Confucians held that ordinary social lives had provided abundant venues for people to develop their virtues, such as families, clan associations, the workplace, local schools, and charitable organizations. As long as a peasant son performs his filial duties well, he is on the right track of becoming a sage without having to serve as a minister in the royal court or participate in major political decisions (Chan 2014b, 790).

For this reason, traditionalist Confucians can argue that the Neo-Confucian ideal of sagehood is compatible with a hierarchical political system, as long as political hierarchies in the regime do not turn into a totalitarianism that radically inhibits the formation of meaningful social interactions. In Jiang Qing's institutional design, ordinary people have an important voice in the *Shuminyuan*, and the power of political elites is limited both by certain checks-and-balances mechanisms and by educational programs that cultivate rulers' moral integrity and humaneness. Although it is highly doubtful whether these constraints can effectively prevent power abuse, it still leaves spaces for ordinary people to cultivate their sagely virtues in a broad range of social activities. Even in contemporary China (a regime that Zeng Yi defends), where the Communist Party retains certain totalitarian means to control the society, it is still perfectly possible for a person to become a filial son or daughter, a responsible and loving parent, a trustworthy friend, a beloved teacher, and a hardworking employee, provided that they can purify their selfish human desires and identify themselves with universal coherence. Therefore, although the sagehood ideal in Neo-Confucianism requires political power to be within certain limits, it is still a far cry from justifying a full-blown constitutional democracy, let alone the kind of participatory democracy preferred by Angle, in which ordinary people are not only permitted, but also encouraged to play a role in making even the most important political decisions for the country (Angle 2010, 210-212).

B. Ethics and Politics as Co-Essentials of Confucianism

Angle's hasty justification for constitutional democracy, tradi-

tionalists may argue, reflects his implicit negative attitude toward traditional Confucian political thought: in addition to ethical teachings, premodern Confucianism cannot make any significant and creative contributions in political thinking and institutional design for the contemporary world. After all, Jiang Qing may ask, if Angle claims himself to be a faith Confucian, why does he choose constitutional democracy, born in the modern West, as their first resort when designing a Confucian polity, rather than choosing Confucian texts as his resort to look for useful insights? What enables Angle to admire traditional Confucian ethics while discarding traditional Confucian politics is the argument that compared with the ethical ideal of sagehood, the traditional, non-democratic political system is not an essential component of the Confucian core, and therefore can be replaced by constitutional democracy, a regime that Angle claims to be better able to realize the Confucian ethical ideal. It is precisely this conception of the relationship between Confucian ethics and Confucian politics that Jiang and his traditionalist followers want to challenge.

In contemporary China, the relationship between ethics and politics occupies the center of Confucian political debate. As David Elstein correctly points out, "[a]lmost all modern Ruist [Confucian] thinkers see a tension between the ethical and political sides of Ruism and make a choice about which is more important" (Elstein 2015, 23). As anti-democratic thinkers, traditionalist Confucians like Jiang Qing argue against one-sidedly defining the Confucian core as ethical rather than political. In his *Political Confucianism*, Jiang uses "heart-mind Confucianism" (*xinxing ruxue* 心性儒學) to refer to Confucian strands that give priority to individual moral development, such as Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and ONC, and uses "political Confucianism" (*zhengzhi ruxue* 政治儒學) to label strands, most notably Gongyang learning, that focus more on building laws, rituals, social conventions, and political institutions to maintain social order and good governance. According to Jiang, these two strands jointly constitute the essential spirit of Confucianism, and the best contemporary Confucian theory should cover both aspects of the Confucian tradition. But since Overseas Confucians one-sidedly focus

on individual ethics while leaving politics to Western constitutional democracy, argues Jiang, his task for the time being is to develop a "political Confucianism" in order to recover the political ambitions of traditional Confucianism (Jiang 2003, 4-5, 51-52).

Angle has yet to confront this challenge. In his *CCPP*, he briefly criticizes Jiang's theory by arguing that "Jiang's idea that inner morality and outer politics are independent, parallel tracks is only tenable if moral development does not depend on a particular political form. We will see that Mou lays the groundwork for me to argue to the contrary: political (and social) institutional forms do matter to moral development, and often matter enormously" (Angle 2012, 32). Therefore, it seems that Angle still tacitly regards individual moral development as the core concern of Confucianism, without confronting Jiang's argument that politics is also an indispensable component of the Confucian ideal. Based on his reading of the *Gongyang Commentary*, Jiang argues that there is an independent realm of "the political" in Confucianism that cannot be regarded as a mere means to the ethical end (Jiang 2003, 52). Laws, rituals, political institutions, and a hierarchical social structure help maintain a peaceful political order and achieve good governance, but for political Confucians, argues Jiang, order and good governance do not necessarily aim to maximize the moral development of each individual, though it leaves social spaces for the realization of the Neo-Confucian ideal of sagehood, as I have argued above.[6]

Therefore, if both ethics and politics constitute the core of Confucianism, then Angle cannot claim that his ethics-centered Progressive Confucianism is more authentically Confucian than Jiang Qing's politics-centered Confucianism. Jiang can legitimately argue that by leaving institutional creation to Western democrats, Angle is underestimating the ability of Confucianism to invent its own political institutions in modern times.

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[6] This understanding of Confucianism echoes with Loubna El Amine's recent work on classical Confucianism, in which she challenges the "ethics-first approach" and argues that Confucian masters judged the success of political rule—the establishment and maintenance of political order—by its own standard, "distinct from the standards the Confucians use for the assessment of individual life" (El Amine 2015, 10-11).

C. Gongyang Learning as an Influential Strand of Confucianism

Without resorting to extra-Confucian reasons to justify a consti-tutional democracy, there are still two strategies that Angle and other progressive Confucians could use to question the Confucian pedigree of Jiang Qing and his followers. The first strategy is to downplay the importance of the Gongyang strand in Confucianism (Elstein 2015, 152-153). Although Angle has never personally used this strategy, it could be argued that since the influence of Gongyang learning declined after its popularity in Han Dynasties, building a contemporary Confucianism upon this strand runs afoul of Angle's approach of "following tradition's own development" and connecting contemporary thinking to the latest and most influential strand of Confucianism.

This strategy, however, would not work well in refuting Jiang. After all, Jiang may reasonably retort that in Qing Dynasty, the Neo-Confucian strand already declined, and in the nineteenth century the Gongyang strand was powerfully revived to justify various reformist agendas (Jiang 2003, 48; Elman 1990; Wood 1995). For example, Kang Youwei (1858-1927), the most famous Gongyang scholar in late Qing, justified radical political reform in the 1890s based on his interpretation of the *Annals* according to Gongyang hermeneutics (Hsiao 1975). Therefore, if consciously following the tradition's own development counts as an important requirement for crafting contemporary Confucian theories, then it is legitimate for Jiang to build his political Confucianism upon the Gongyang strand.

However, Jiang and traditionalist Confucians can also justify their position without relying on the fact that Gongyang learning was revived in modern China. The distinctive feature of Angle's narrative of Confucian intellectual history is his emphasis on the dynamic nature of Confucianism against the Eurocentric assumption that Confucianism in particular and non-Western thought in general are static traditions without any progressive innovation. His *HRCT* and *Sagehood* aim to show that Confucianism is able to change in a progressive manner even without the stimulus of Western thought. For Angle, the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and

Ming Dynasties should be celebrated precisely because Neo-Confucianism made significant advances in promoting the ideal of moral equality. Egalitarianism is therefore the normative standard for Angle to evaluate the level of desirability of different Confucian strands. However, for traditionalist Confucians who do not find moral and political equality attractive and desirable, Neo-Confucianism is regarded as an unfortunate regress in Confucian history, and therefore older strands of Confucianism, which place a greater emphasis on inequality, elitism, hierarchy, and patriarchy, should be revived as an intellectual authority for contemporary China. Therefore, even if the Gongyang School were not revived in late Qing, it is still legitimate for Jiang to return to more ancient strands of Confucianism for intellectual inspiration.

Pressured by the revival of Gongyang learning, on which almost all traditionalist Confucians rely, Angle and other progressive Confucians have employed another strategy to question the Confucian pedigree of their rivals—the attempt to show that Jiang Qing's interpretations of key Gongyang texts are far-fetched. For example, Angle argues that a closer reading of Dong Zhongshu's *Chunqiu fanlu*, an important Confucian work in Western Han Dynasty that draws heavily on Gongyang insights, shows that there is little text evidence to argue that Gongyang learning promotes three different forms of political legitimacy, a theoretical basis for Jiang's tricameral system I described in Part II (Angle 2014, 504). In addition, Elstein argues, and Angle concurs, that "[t]he institutions Jiang proposes have almost no antecedents in Chinese history" (Elstein 2015, 154), and "[t]his is a problem for a position that claims to root itself in continuity with past Confucian institutional practice" (Angle 2012, 54). They hope to urge Jiang to live up to his own standard: If Jiang, as a self-claimed Gongyangist, really has a fundamentalist attachment to certain Confucian classics, then he should at least be faithful to textual evidence.

However, traditionalists are not helpless in the face of this challenge. The nature of the *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, as Elstein correctly points out, is to decode Confucius's hidden messages from the subtle wordings of the *Annals*, one of the five classics believed to be edited by Confucius himself

(Elstein 2015, 152). The *Gongyang Commentary* as a book in itself has concrete philosophical arguments, but as an exegesis of the *Annals*, its more profound contribution in Chinese history is a hermeneutical method that allows and even encourages later scholars to develop idiosyncratic interpretations of the *Annals*. In so doing, it opens a window for scholars in different dynasties to use this classic to respond to new political challenges to which no other classic has provided straightforward answers. The precise interpretation of the *Annals* "often varied from commentator to commentator and from age to age, depending on the particular problems that dominated each period" (Wood 1995, 60). By portraying Confucius as a "lawmaker" rather than a mere scholar and by pretending to develop innovative ideas from Confucius's political teachings, Gongyang learning has the advantage of legitimating even the most radical political changes in a given time, whether revolutionary or reactionary. For this reason, Alan Thomas Wood asserts that "[f]rom the early Han to the end of the nineteenth century, the *Annals* were a source of guidance for scholars in need of inspiration in confronting the most fundamental political problems of their day" (Wood 1995, 21).

This hermeneutics is inherited by Jiang Qing. According to him in *Political Confucianism*, by decoding Confucius's political teachings, Gongyang hermeneutics is guided by the ultimate spirit of "reforming, inventing, and establishing political institutions" (Jiang 2003, 160). One should never treat any particular doctrine advanced by a given Gongyangist in a given time as the only correct interpretation of the *Annals*, as this doctrine may not be suitable for solving new challenges in a different time. For this reason, Jiang can claim that he respects Dong Zhongshu and Kang Youwei without adopting the concrete institutions suggested by them in Western Han and Late Qing. Zeng Yi can also set aside Jiang's theory of triple legitimacy and tricameral regime while insisting that he is following in Jiang's footsteps.[7]

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[7] In a short essay on how to read Dong's *Chunqiu fanlu*, Zeng also argues that a better way of comprehending this book is to treat it as an example of Gongyang hermeneutics. For Zeng, the concrete philosophical arguments presented by Dong, such as the interactions between Heaven and men and the doctrine of five elements, are less essential than the way he decoded Confucius's esoteric teachings (Zeng 2017).

Therefore, while Angle and Elstein accuse Jiang's theory of being un-faithful to the *Chunqiu fanlu* and unprecedented in Chinese history, Jiang and Zeng could retort that these attacks misunderstand the nature of Gongyang learning. Even if it can be proved that Jiang is a bad Gongyangist, it is still possible for a better Gongyangist to offer a better Gongyang theory in the future.

V. Conclusion: From Progressive Confucian Political Theory to Progressive Political Theory

By raising these challenges on behalf of traditionalist Confucians, I do not mean to defend their political proposals, which are funda-mentally problematic as political theories and extremely dangerous as political ideologies. My point is that Angle and his fellow pro-gressives undervalue the reasonableness of the traditionalist under-standing of Confucianism and the difficulty of confronting the traditionalists purely on Confucian terms. Most importantly, despite repeated emphasis on his authentic Confucian pedigree, Angle cannot persuasively demonstrate that he is not using external and modern democratic criteria to judge, select, and reconfigure Confucianism. I do not deny the possibility that Angle and progressive Confucians may ultimately provide better Confucian arguments to successfully refute traditionalist Confucianism, but if Angle seriously believes that constitutional democracy is good for the Chinese people and should be established at all cost, then these intricate interpretive debates within the Confucian circle may have the effect of diverting the progressives' attention from the most urgent task in contemporary China and blunting the critical sharpness of progressive Confucianism as progressive social criticism in the Chinese context. After all, even though one can argue that the "civic culture" of contemporary Chinese society still has a conspicuous Confucian characteristic, ordinary people, especially those experiencing unbearable injustices in their daily life, would not find these technical debates on Confucianism directly relevant to their struggles at all. Therefore, demonstrating progressive Confucianism as authentic Confucianism is relatively

non-essential compared with the justification for progressive princi-
ples embedded in progressive Confucianism, such as political equality,
civil and political rights, the rule of law, and democratic procedures. A
better strategy, I suggest, is to confront traditionalist Confucians more
straightforwardly and transform an intra-Confucian debate around
Confucian texts to an extra-Confucian debate about the desirability of
constitutional democracy in China.

The primary reason for initiating an extra-Confucian debate
about constitutional democracy is that traditionalist Confucians
have already provided extensive extra-Confucian reasons for their
conversion to traditionalist Confucianism, but few of them have been
powerfully criticized and confronted by progressive Confucians,
who one-sidedly focus on demonstrating that traditionalists are
bad Confucians. In his reviews of Jiang and other traditionalist
Confucians, Angle has repeatedly pointed out the "fundamentalist"
feature of their attitude toward Confucian classics, and suggests
that this blind attachment to an authority is out of touch with poli-
tical realities in contemporary China (Angle 2014, 503-504; 2018a,
87). A political philosopher in contemporary time, argues Angle,
should value Confucianism not because of its ancient pedigree, but
because it can contribute something valuable for our modern life. A
philosophical reconstruction of Confucianism, according to Angle,
"aims to tell us what is true about human lives and values insofar as
they relate to our lives together in political society. This is distinct
from simply explicating what one or another tradition has said," like
what Jiang Qing has done (Angle 2012, 19).

This characterization of traditionalist Confucians as blind
followers of Confucian authority without a sense of reality mis-
understands the motivation of traditionalist Confucians and
underestimates their political ambitions. Traditionalist Confucians
were not born traditional Confucians; they became traditionalist
Confucians because they were deeply disappointed with other
available political doctrines that they once supported.[8] For example,

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[8] Before publishing his first study of Gongyang learning in 1997, Jiang Qing was ori-
ginally a Marxist, later a Christian liberal, and sympathized with the ONC. For more
about his intellectual biography, see Bell (2013).

accompanying Jiang's fervent promotion of political Confucianism is his harsh criticism of democracy in Western societies and his insistence that China should not replicate this regime. In his answer to the question why China should be re-Confucianized, Jiang argues that democracy is responsible for the many contemporary "political diseases" such as selfishness, egoism, hedonism, consumerism, short-sightedness, and a negligence of common challenges for the entire humanity, such as climate change and other environment issues (Jiang 2016, 10). For Jiang, only by restricting popular sovereignty and rebuilding "sacredness" and political hierarchy can these issues be resolved. Therefore, as Elstein correctly mentions, there is a universalist dimension in Jiang's political Confucianism. "The kingly way is not just the solution to China's political problems; it is the universal solution for every nation" (Elstein 2015, 144). China's return to its own political tradition, according to Jiang, actually provides an example for other nations to see that liberal democracy can be replaced by a more desirable alternative. Zeng Yi concurs with Jiang's ambition. He emphasizes in an interview that the ultimate ambition of Mainland Confucians is not merely building a "cultural China" for narrow-minded nationalist purposes, but building a "political China" that can set an example for the solutions of fundamental issues facing humanity as a whole. It is for this purpose, Zeng argues, that Gongyang learning is relevant to our own time, because this strand of Confucianism is most insightful in providing worldly solutions to social, political, legal, and even spiritual issues (Zeng 2016).

These critiques of liberal democracy should be taken seriously not because they have offered profound theories, but because similar anti-democratic sentiments periodically reappear in different corners of the world, and sometimes cause political disasters.[9] In addition, political scientists constantly remind us that democracy can easily fail due to the misbehavior of the elites, the negligence of

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[9] In a classic study of Sayyid Qutb, for example, Roxanne Euben famously argues that Islamic fundamentalism should not be understood as a phenomenon unique to the Islamic world, but as a political discourse mirroring Western critiques of modernity in post-Enlightenment periods (Euben 1999, 11). This observation applies to traditionalist Confucianism in China as well.

the masses, the hostility of foreigners, and various other accidents (Achen and Bartels 2017). If progressive Confucians think that a political regime as fragile, vulnerable, and volatile as liberal democracy is still normatively desirable for the Chinese people, then they must provide persuasive arguments independent from Confucianism to defend their commitments.

In conclusion, what ultimately gives rise to the disagreement between progressive and traditionalist Confucians is not their different understandings of Confucianism but their different attitudes toward modernity and liberal constitutional democracy. Progressives' argument that Confucianism should accommodate the trend of modernity suggests that they implicitly value the desirability of political equality, civil and political rights, and the rule of law, but traditionalists are not bound by these values, and have offered straightforward reasons as to why they are undesirable. In the face of their challenges progressives should offer extra-Confucian reasons to explain why the traditionalists' diagnosis of constitutional democracy is wrong, why the Chinese people need constitutional democracy to live a respectful life, why the traditionalists are mischaracterizing the political problems that the Chinese people are facing, and why their Confucian-inspired institutional proposals cannot resolve the most serious problems in contemporary China, such as corruption and political oppression. They should not merely assert the universal validity of progressive values, but show how these values are connected with the daily struggles of the Chinese people against the authoritarian regime under which they currently live. An intra-Confucian debate in which Angle frequently demonstrates his Confucian pedigree actually makes progressive Confucianism vulnerable to traditionalist Confucianism, but an extra-Confucian debate around the desirability of constitutional democracy can give progressives the weapon to confront traditionalists more effectively.

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