

Negotiating the Confucian Dao-tong Tension: Mou Zongsan, Qian Mu, and the Genealogy of Their Methodologies

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Abstract

The Confucian Dao-tong 道統 debates are often understood as sectarian conflicts over Confucian orthodoxy, with Dao-tong frequently translated in this restricted sense. Yet the concept contains a profound internal tension arising from its attempt to integrate the transcendence of the Dao with a finite historical tradition (Tong). The theoretical significance of the Dao-tong debates lies in the diverse ways Confucian scholars have sought to mediate this tension. The controversy between Zhu Xi 朱熹 and Chen Liang 陳亮 provided the first systematic articulation of the Dao-tong tension and established two enduring approaches: a metaphysical stance emphasizing the Dao's transcendence and a historicist stance emphasizing the continuity of Tong with historical tradition. By tracing the ongoing debate between these two approaches, this paper examines how Confucian thinkers have interpreted and negotiated the Dao-tong tension. It further explores how Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and Qian Mu 錢穆, drawing on inherited intellectual resources, respectively developed more refined metaphysical and historicist approaches. Finally, it argues that the significance of Dao-tong extends beyond Confucianism, since the relationship between transcendent existence and historical tradition is a concern shared across intellectual traditions. Reconsidering the Dao-tong debates therefore not only deepens our understanding of Confucianism but also opens a shared theoretical space for dialogue with other intellectual traditions.

Keywords: Dao-tong 道統, Confucian orthodoxy, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Qian Mu 錢穆, transcendence, tradition

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I. The Dao-tong Debates and Dao-tong Tension

Since Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) formally articulated the notion of Dao-tong (Cai 2019, 232), it has remained a persistent concern in Confucian intellectual history. In modern China, Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and Qian Mu (1895–1990) offered two influential yet divergent accounts. Mou’s view is primarily articulated in his “trilogy on the new ‘outer kingliness’” (*xin waiwang sanshu* 新外王三書) of the mid-twentieth century, whereas Qian’s mature position is presented in his 1961 essay “Chinese Confucianism and Cultural Tradition” (Qian 2011a, 82–84). Although Mou and Qian did not engage in direct debate, their intellectual successors, Qian’s student Yu Yingshi 余英時 and Mou’s student Li Minghui 李明輝 exchanged critiques in the 1990s that brought to light a structural opposition between their teachers’ respective interpretations. Yu (2014, 20) characterized their positions as sharply opposed, distinguishing Qian’s intellectual-historical interpretation of Dao-tong from Mou’s philosophical framework, while Li (1994) responded by clarifying key aspects of Mou’s conception.

This divergence between Mou and Qian should be situated within the broader, millennium-long history of Confucian Dao-tong debates. Within the term Dao-tong, Dao 道 denotes a transcendent existence grounding both the cosmos and moral life (Cai 2019, 6–7; Liu 2025). Yet in Confucianism, this transcendence takes the form of “immanent transcendence,” whereby the Dao is realized within moral subjectivity rather than posited as an external absolute (Mou 2003g, 22). Tong 統, by contrast, refers to the historical tradition through which the Dao is transmitted and actualized, encompassing not only doctrinal inheritance but also efforts to embody the Dao in concrete social and political life (Lai 2016). Nevertheless, discussions of Dao-tong almost invariably appear in tandem. This is evidenced by the historical progression from the competing lineages of the Song dynasty (Zhu 2020), through Ming–Qing critiques of the Cheng–Zhu conception of Dao-tong (Wang 2001), to the contemporary Mou–Qian divide. How, then, should we understand this recurring phenomenon?

One common interpretation reduces these debates to struggles for orthodoxy, attributing them to scholars’ claims to exclusive access

to the true Dao. Chen Liang (2022, 331), for instance, accused Zhu Xi of “championing a sect for the Cheng brothers” (只是與二程主張門戶), a view echoed in some recent scholarship (Tang 2023). However, such readings, prioritizing private stances and psychological speculation, often substitute for a rigorous examination of the Dao-tong concept itself.

Regarding conceptual analysis, Liang Tao (2013, 88-93) proposes two paradigms—“understanding history in terms of the Dao” (*yidao yantong* 以道言統) and “understanding the Dao in terms of history” (*yitong yandao* 以統言道). While avoiding a reductive sectarian reading, Liang still treats Dao-tong as an internally coherent concept. However, I argue that this remains a subject for further examination, as there is an intrinsic tension between Dao and Tong themselves: (1) From a metaphysical stance that privileges the Dao’s transcendence, both the recognition and inheritance of the Dao necessitate the transcendence of historical tradition. Since the transcendent Dao is universal and eternal, it is in principle accessible to anyone at any time; consequently, relegating previous Confucians to heterodoxy has no bearing on one’s own access to the Dao. This view resonates clearly with Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), who declared that “all past sages are but passing shadows; liangzhi alone is my teacher” (千聖皆過影, 良知乃吾師) (Wang 2015, 657). Under such conditions, Dao-tong risks severing its connection with historical tradition and degenerating into a subjective fabrication—a tendency repeatedly attested in Chinese intellectual history (Ge 2006).

(2) The historicist stance, by prioritizing the non-deviation of Tong from historical tradition, appears more objective; yet it confronts a dilemma. Historical tradition is inevitably entangled with contingent factors. If such contingencies lack a necessary relation to the Dao, one must transcend history and revert to a metaphysical stance; if they are granted such necessity, the universality of the Dao is dissolved by binding it to the accidental. For Confucians, this consequence is especially grave: once universality is undermined, the distinction between good and evil loses its stable normative ground, and Dao-tong risks collapsing into a domain where moral judgment and practice become untenable.

Seen in this light, the Dao-tong debates function as an intellectual manifestation of this unresolved tension. While critiques expose the tension within the rival stance, new interpretations of Dao-tong offer alternative methods of mediating this tension. Despite their occasional sectarian overtones, the enduring significance of these debates lies in the continuous refinement of methods for negotiating the Dao-tong tension.

The Zhu Xi–Chen Liang debate over the Three Dynasties (三代, c. 2070–256 BCE) and the Han–Tang period (漢, 202 BCE–220 CE; 唐, 618–907 CE) offers the first systematic manifestation of the Dao-tong tension. While both affirmed the Three Dynasties as a period of full engagement with the Dao, they diverged sharply over the Han–Tang period. Zhu denied that the Han–Tang period embodied the Dao, arguing that “the Dao transmitted by Yao, Shun, the Three Kings, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius was not practiced for a single day.”¹ Chen rejected Zhu’s assessment, arguing that during the Han–Tang period, “although some practices did not accord with the principle of the Dao . . . wherever enduring achievements emerged, slivers of Heavenly Principle were nonetheless at work.”²

Chen (2022, 331) himself recognized that this dispute concerned not merely historical evaluation but the conditions under which the Dao discloses itself in history. While this dimension has been widely noted (Tian 2019, 52–53), what remains insufficiently examined is how the dispute manifests the Dao-tong tension: Chen’s historicist stance integrated the Han–Tang into the Dao-tong, while Zhu criticized this for undermining the Dao’s transcendence; conversely, Zhu’s metaphysical stance, which excluded the Han–Tang, prompted Chen to accuse him of reducing the Dao-tong to a subjective fiction detached from historical tradition.

The divergence between Mou Zongsan and Qian Mu constitutes a recent manifestation of the Dao-tong tension. Both revisit the Zhu–Chen debate to formulate their respective accounts of Dao-tong. Mou aligns himself with Zhu’s metaphysical stance, while Qian gravitates

¹ 堯舜, 三王, 周公, 孔子所傳之道, 未嘗一日得行於天地之間也 (Zhu 2002, 1583).

² 惟其時有轉移, 故其間不無滲漏 . . . 而其間或能有成者, 有分毫天理行乎其間也 (Chen 2022, 290).

toward Chen's historicist stance. On this basis, Section II analyzes the sustained criticisms directed at the metaphysical stance and examines how Mou refined it through its integration with a philosophy of history. Section III turns to the historicist stance, tracing the criticisms it has encountered and focusing on how Qian deepened it through his concept of "cultural life." Finally, this paper offers a reflective examination of the views of Mou and Qian and clarifies the theoretical significance of revisiting this discourse.

II. The Metaphysical Method and Mou's Theoretical Advancement

In revisiting the Zhu–Chen debate, Mou Zongsan acknowledged their mutual critiques, yet his substantive judgment clearly favored Zhu's metaphysical stance. Mou (2003e, 273, 278–79) regarded Chen's dismantling of the Dao's transcendence as a fundamental flaw that reduced moral insight to "hero-worship and intuitionism" (英雄主義, 直覺主義), whereas he saw Zhu's position as requiring only further refinement, because Zhu directly grounded rationality and moral virtue ontologically. Nevertheless, since the Zhu–Chen debate, Zhu's metaphysical stance has been subject to sustained criticism, from Ming–Qing thinkers to recent scholars like Qian Mu. In a contemporary context, this challenge becomes more acute: if defending Chinese culture involves pitting a "Chinese Dao" against a "Western Dao," the Dao's transcendence is jeopardized, as a genuinely transcendent existence must be singular and universal. More broadly, the plurality of historical traditions reinforces the historicist critique: a metaphysical Dao-tong risks deviating from actual history and collapsing into a subjective fiction. Accordingly, if Mou is to uphold a metaphysical stance, he must address these challenges, thereby necessitating a new metaphysical method to mediate the Dao-tong tension.

A. The Dao-tong Tension within the Metaphysical Stance

The Zhu–Chen debate reveals Zhu Xi's metaphysical stance, which prioritizes the Dao's transcendence. For Zhu, historical tradition is

complex, and not everything within it results from full engagement with the Dao. Accordingly, discerning the Dao and Dao-tong requires a method that first transcends history. This commitment is clearly articulated in Zhu's proposed reading sequence:

One must first study the *Analects* and the *Mencius* before turning to history. It is then as if a bright mirror is placed, from which neither beauty nor ugliness can escape. If one engages with history without having thoroughly studied the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, and *Great Learning*, one lacks a standard of judgment and is therefore easily misled.³

Within this paradigm, Zhu located the origin of Dao-tong in the ancient sages' act of "succeeding Heaven and establishing the ultimate standard" (*jitian liji* 繼天立極), thereby identifying the Dao with transcendent Heaven. Taking this transcendent standard as his criterion, Zhu regarded the teachings transmitted among Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹—formulated in the "Sixteen-Character Transmission of the Mind" (*shiliuzi xinchuan* 十六字心傳)—as the earliest articulation of the Dao-tong: "The human-mind is precarious; the Dao-mind is subtle. Be refined, be single-minded, and sincerely hold fast to the Mean."⁴ Therefore, only through prior apprehension of this transcendent Dao can the authentic Dao-tong be discerned.

Although Chen Liang explicitly opposed Zhu's metaphysical stance, he did not intend to negate the Dao's transcendence. Amidst the Tang–Song rise of sophisticated Buddhist metaphysics, Song Confucians felt compelled to construct a rival framework (Xu 2016, 40–41). It is precisely against this backdrop that Chen (2022, 295) criticized Zhu's Dao as having become indistinguishable from Buddhist tenets: a "vacuous principle detached from human life and practical utility." Consequently, Chen insisted that the genuine Dao and Dao-tong must be grounded in actual historical tradition.

³ 凡讀書，先讀語孟，然後觀史，則如明鑑在此，而妍醜不可逃。若未讀徹語孟中庸大學便去看史，胷中無一箇權衡，多爲所惑 (Li 1986, 195).

⁴ 人心惟危，道心惟微，惟精惟一，允執厥中 (Zhu 2011, 16).

Based on this historicist stance, Chen criticized Zhu for misconstruing both the Three Dynasties and the Han–Tang period. While the former were not free from bloodshed and power struggles, the latter were not devoid of merit; therefore, a serious examination of the historical tradition reveals that the Dao posited by Zhu could not have existed in a pure form—not only in the Han–Tang but even in the Three Dynasties themselves (Ding 2013). This critique suggests that Zhu’s conception of Dao-tong is ultimately a subjective fiction.

Further deconstructing this fabricated Dao-tong, Chen contended that it merely expressed the desire of a few to monopolize orthodoxy:

Whispering in pairs, as if passing secrets; drawing boundaries, as if erecting a private altar, they exclude the rest of the world. . . . In a world they perceive as entirely driven by profit and desire, they claim that the last remaining thread of Dao is preserved by them alone.⁵

Therefore, in Chen’s view, Zhu’s metaphysical stance caused the Dao-tong to deviate entirely from actual historical tradition, transforming it into an instrument for denigrating others and contesting orthodoxy.

As Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism became the state ideology (Liu 1973), Zhu’s articulation of Dao-tong came to dominate the intellectual landscape. From the late Ming onward, however, Confucian thought underwent a paradigmatic shift. Intellectual currents such as Practical Learning (*shixue* 實學) and evidential scholarship (*kaojuxue* 考據學) increasingly echoed Chen’s historicist stance. Although Zhu himself emphasized practical utility, by the late Ming, Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism was widely perceived as detached from historical realities. This perception fueled a growing dissatisfaction that crystallized into the insistence that the Dao must be discussed in conjunction with concrete affairs and historical tradition, a concern central to Practical Learning during the Ming–Qing transition (He 1991).

Evidential scholarship posed an even more direct challenge to Zhu’s Dao-tong. While Zhu regarded the “Sixteen-Character Trans-

⁵ 三三兩兩, 附耳而語, 有同告密; 畫界而立, 一似結壇, 盡絕一世之人於門外 . . . 世界皆是利欲, 斯道之不絕者僅如縷耳 (Chen 2022, 300).

mission of the Mind” as the authentic record of the Dao-tong (Zheng 2025), Yan Ruoku 閻若璩 demonstrated that this passage was a Han-dynasty fabrication (Wang 2001). In this respect, evidential scholarship radicalized Chen’s critique by undermining the very textual foundation of Zhu’s narrative.

This philological turn was driven by the recognition that reliable texts are a prerequisite for apprehending the Confucian Dao (Yu 2012, 334–35). Yet a broader engagement with the classics led Ming–Qing scholars to recognize the intrinsic plurality of the Confucian tradition, in which different perspectives represent distinct articulations of the Dao. This insight motivated “the critique of the ‘orthodox transmission’ of Neo-Confucianism and the re-formation of the Confucian scholarly transmission” (Zhang 2006). Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 offered a representative formulation:

The Dao is not the private possession of any single lineage. The vital paths of the sages are dispersed across diverse schools; the more arduous the search, the more authentic the discovery. Though some grasp it more fully than others, none can be said to stand entirely outside the Dao.⁶

From this standpoint, Zhu’s Dao-tong was rejected not on the basis of subjective intent but due to a structural limitation inherent in the metaphysical stance: its tendency to narrow the content of the Dao. Since the Dao is interpreted and inherited across plural perspectives, it can only be discerned through critical engagement with authentic texts and historical traditions. Accordingly, even if the “Sixteen-Character Transmission of the Mind” were genuine, Zhu’s Dao-tong would still represent only one perspective rather than the totality of the Dao or its transmission.

Unlike Chen Liang and most Ming–Qing Confucians, who did not intend to reject the Dao’s transcendence, Qian Mu radicalized the Dao-tong tension. In his view, any commitment to transcendence renders

⁶ 蓋道非一家之私，聖賢之血路，散殊於百家，求之愈艱，則得之愈真。雖其得之有至有不至，要不可謂無與於道者也 (Huang 2012c, 379).

Dao-tong a subjective construct detached from authentic historical tradition. This position is most clearly articulated through his critique of so-called “Unconventional Confucians” (*biechu zhi ru* 別出之儒).

Qian (2011a, 82) introduced “Unconventional Confucians” to describe figures who pride themselves on being the rightful successor to the Dao. What unites such thinkers is a metaphysical stance that elevates “one or two texts, or even one or two phrases” into an unquestionable, all-encompassing principle (Qian 2011a, 77). Zhu Xi (2011, 16) claimed that Yao’s injunction to “sincerely hold fast to the Mean” was “ultimate and complete,” and Wang Yangming’s (2015, 95) assertion that “the extension of innate knowledge” (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) exhausted the entirety of learning, exemplify this tendency. Accordingly, Qian (2011a, 74, 77) characterized Wang as “the pinnacle among Unconventional Confucians” and Zhu as pursuing a similar project through encyclopedic synthesis. By revisiting historical Dao-tong debates, Qian argued that the metaphysical stance consistently constructs a transcendent Dao from minimal textual evidence, dismissing all that failed to conform to this Dao as contingent and insignificant. Clearly, this strategy inevitably neglects vast portions of classical records and factual realities. A Dao-tong grounded in transcendence thus becomes isolated, fragile, and ultimately subjective, deviating from historical tradition (Qian 2011a, 83).

From the Zhu–Chen debate onward, Zhu Xi’s metaphysical stance has faced sustained criticism. These critiques collectively expose a structural tension inherent in Dao-tong as formulated within a metaphysical stance: once the Dao’s transcendence is prioritized, the Tong cannot but drift away from historical reality, degenerating into a subjective fiction. Under these circumstances, if Mou Zongsan is to maintain a metaphysical stance, he must confront this challenge by articulating a metaphysical method capable of mediating the Dao-tong tension from within that stance.

B. Mou’s Metaphysical Method

To mediate the Dao-tong tension from within a metaphysical stance, Mou Zongsan argues that Dao-tong must be grounded in a philosophy

of history. He locates the enduring significance of the Zhu–Chen debate precisely in its implicit demand for such a philosophy (Mou 2003e, 245). Accordingly, the Dao-tong problem is transformed into a historico-philosophical question concerning the possibility of history—one that, in the modern context, must account not only for the possibility of Chinese history, but also for the plurality of human historical traditions.

Zhu Xi confronted a structurally similar situation. On the one hand, Chen Liang criticized his metaphysical stance for severing Dao-tong from authentic history; on the other, Zhu was compelled to distinguish Confucianism from Buddhism. Yet Zhu showed little interest in developing a philosophy of history, instead adopting a dismissive attitude toward historical tradition. His critique of Chen is emblematic: “Reading history is like watching people brawl; what is there to see in a brawl? Chen has been led astray by history his entire life.”⁷ For Zhu, the exclusion of historical traditions that failed to conform to the Dao was not a problem to be resolved but the necessary consequence of properly engaging with the Dao. This position was grounded in Zhu’s distinction between the Dao-mind (*daoxin* 道心), which fully apprehends the transcendent Dao, and the human-mind (*renxin* 人心), which does not (Zhu 2002, 1586). On this basis, history was divided into traditions aligned with the Dao and those that deviated from it, with the latter being categorically excluded from the Dao-tong. Zhu thus stated that one of the primary functions of the Dao-tong is to continue “the teaching transmitted among the sages, thereby judging subsequent history and maintaining its rectitude.”⁸

Meanwhile, although Zhu acknowledged that even the Three Dynasties were marked by bloodshed and power struggles, he argued that the Han–Tang period should be excluded from the Dao-tong because it lacked the proper learning of the Dao (Zhao 2018, 343–45). In other words, if full engagement with the Dao yields practical results, those benefits become part of the Dao-tong. Where correct cognition of the Dao failed to produce outward realization, doctrinal transmis-

⁷ 看史只如看人相打，相打有甚好看處？陳同父一生被史壞了 (Li 1986, 2965).

⁸ 諸聖相傳心法，而於後世之事有以裁之而不失其正 (Zhu 2002, 1589).

sion alone still constituted Dao-tong, retaining moral legitimacy despite its fragility.

Regarding the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism, although Zhu absorbed certain Buddhist insights (Lai 2017, 78-127), he maintained the Confucian Dao as the sole criterion, asserting that the two were not parallel disciplines but rather right versus wrong (Li 2007). Consequently, just as the Han-Tang period was excluded from the Dao-tong, the rejection of the Buddhist tradition was, for Zhu, entirely justified.

While Mou Zongsan affirms Zhu's metaphysical stance, he rejects Zhu's way of mediating the Dao-tong tension. Accordingly, although Mou emphasizes that the primary function of Dao-tong is to "affirm the value of moral religion and safeguard the essence of humanity opened by Confucius and Mencius," he further insists on the need to "actualize history from the perspective of dynamic elevation and transformation."⁹ This claim effectively calls for a philosophy of history.

Such historico-philosophical awareness had already emerged in the Ming-Qing period, most notably in the work of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之. Wang argued that historical phenomena cannot be evaluated in isolation but must be understood through their complex interrelations. His famous remark—"the Qin abolished the feudal lords out of a desire to privatize the realm, yet Heaven utilized this private motive to realize a greater public good"¹⁰—illustrates this view. Although the Qin rulers did not consciously practice the Dao, their institutional reforms nonetheless created conditions conducive to later moral and political development (Han 2021). The importance of Wang's position lies less in the accuracy of his historical verdict than in his attempt to situate historical realities within a process through which the Dao gradually manifests its fulfillment, thereby examining how particular realities may contribute—directly or indirectly—to this realization.

⁹ 肯定道德宗教之價值，護住孔孟所開闢之人生宇宙之本源 (Mou 2003a, 9); 從動的升舉轉化之觀點以真實化歷史 (Mou 2003e, 279).

¹⁰ 秦以私天下之心而罷侯置守，而天假其私以行其大公 (Wang 2011b, 68).

Wang, however, did not carry this position through consistently, as evidenced by his vehement critiques of Buddhism, Daoism, and the Yangming School of Mind (Cheng 2022, 58–59). Nonetheless, Mou Zongsan (2018c, 182–85), deeply appreciative of the historico-philosophical consciousness articulated in Wang’s work, systematically develops it within his own philosophy of history. This development constitutes Mou’s metaphysical method for mediating the tension between the singular, transcendent Dao and historical traditions in both China and the broader human world.

In Mou’s philosophy of history, historical tradition is the arena in which the transcendent Dao progressively realizes itself under contingent conditions. Because human cognition and practice are necessarily limited, the realization of the Dao proceeds neither instantaneously nor linearly but through a tortuous, step-by-step process (Mou 2003c, 13; 2003d, 463). Accordingly, Mou’s notion of historical judgment is not a static moral verdict that simply classifies events as conforming to or deviating from the Dao. Rather, it situates particular historical phenomena within the overall process of the Dao’s gradual fulfillment, asking how—and in what sense—they contribute to this process. Even actions motivated by evil or contingency may, by exposing their own limitations or generating negative lessons, indirectly facilitate later apprehension and realization of the Dao. Thus, while the Dao remains transcendent, Dao-tong need not be severed from actual historical tradition; instead, it is a process that necessarily incorporates—and continuously overcomes—contingency and even evil, thereby realizing a higher degree of the Good through a winding path (Mou 2018b, 193–94).

Compared with Zhu Xi, a further advance in Mou’s project lies in his sustained engagement with the tension between the singular, transcendent Dao and the plurality of historical traditions. In the modern context, the forceful elevation of Confucianism above other traditions—as exemplified by Zhu—became increasingly untenable. In this sense, Mou’s philosophy of history also entails recognizing that different peoples, situated in distinct historical contexts, employ different modes to apprehend and practice the Dao, thereby forming their unique historical traditions (Mou 2003b, 318–22). Thus, while

the constant Dao (*changdao* 常道) is singular and transcendent, its historical realization takes differentiated forms—for instance, Confucian learning of mind and nature in China and Christianity in the West (Mou 2018a, 62). Dao-tong accordingly integrates universality with historical particularity (Li 1994).

Although Mou (2003f, 469–71) regards Confucianism as the “perfect teaching” (*yuan jiao* 圓教) and Christianity as a “detached teaching” (*li jiao* 離教), he does not advocate the exclusion of Christianity. Rather, Mou (2018a, 69–71) maintains that Confucianism and Christianity should mutually learn from one another so as to promote the ongoing refinement of their respective traditions. Thus, by conceiving the plurality of human historical traditions as processes converging toward a common ultimate destination, Mou succeeds in preserving the Dao’s transcendence while rooting the Dao-tong in actual and complex human history.

While Mou’s classification of Confucianism and Christianity may invite further debate, he nevertheless succeeds, to a considerable extent, in alleviating the Dao-tong tension inherent in the metaphysical stance by reframing it as a historico-philosophical inquiry into the possibility of history itself. Because historical practice is inevitably conditioned by contingency and finitude, historical traditions necessarily encompass complex realities, including the coexistence of good and evil. These elements are not to be purged from Dao-tong but constitute the very medium through which the transcendent Dao realizes itself in history. Moreover, the plurality of historical traditions should not be understood statically, but as a dynamic process in which diverse traditions converge toward a shared ultimate orientation through dialogue and mutual transformation. By grounding Dao-tong in a philosophy of history oriented toward the transcendent Dao, Mou preserves the Dao’s singularity while anchoring Dao-tong in concrete and plural historical realities, thereby advancing a distinctive metaphysical method for mediating the Dao-tong tension.

III. The Historicist Method and Qian's Cultural Reinterpretation

In Qian Mu's analysis of the Song–Ming Dao-tong debates, two patterns can be distinguished. The first, which Qian (2011a, 83–84) criticizes as erroneous, is a *monopolizing* pattern that claims exclusive authority over the Dao-tong and, in his view, dominated much of the tradition from the Tang through the Ming. The second, exemplified by the Zhu–Chen debate, resists this tendency by seeking a more objective and inclusive understanding of Dao-tong. It is precisely because Chen Liang affirmed a genuine engagement with the Dao during the Han–Tang period that Qian distinguishes Chen from the dominant *monopolizing* pattern. On this basis, Qian articulates his conception of Dao-tong: “A true Dao-tong must be discussed in terms of the great tradition of history and culture; the entire cultural tradition constitutes the Dao-tong.”¹¹ By identifying Dao-tong with the historical–cultural totality, Qian clearly adopts a historicist stance. Yet because Zhu Xi had already mounted a powerful critique of Chen Liang—later reaffirmed by Mou Zongsan—Qian must reformulate a historicist method in order to address the Dao-tong tension inherent in this stance.

A. The Dao-tong Tension within the Historicist Stance

Although Chen Liang insists that the Dao and Dao-tong must be discovered within concrete historical traditions, he does not deny the Dao's transcendence (Zhang 2012). As Mou Zongsan (2018b, 191) observes, the Zhu–Chen debate concerns primarily the evaluation of the Han–Tang period; even Chen would not claim that the tyrannical Qin rulers engaged with the Dao. In this sense, Zhu and Chen share a commitment to an absolute standard transcending history. Their disagreement lies not in whether such a standard exists but in how it is to be apprehended:

¹¹ 若真道統則須從歷史文化大傳統言，當知此一整個文化大傳統即是道統 (Qian 2011a, 83).

Zhu Xi maintains that the Dao is directly articulated in authoritative texts. As he states, “The Six Classics are writings from before the Three Dynasties; they once passed through the sages and are entirely expressions of Heavenly Principle.”¹² While Zhu thus grounds the cognition of the Dao in specific canonical texts, broader historical traditions serve merely as objects to be judged by this transcendent criterion rather than as reliable epistemic sources for discerning the Dao.

Chen, conversely, rejects this approach. He argues that the Dao is not simply preserved in textual records but manifests through enduring practical efficacy, a feature he regards as distinguishing Confucianism from Buddhism (Chen 2022, 294–95). On this basis, Chen defends the Han–Tang period, emphasizing its sustained capacity to support human life and social order:

For over fifteen hundred years, Heaven and Earth themselves have endured through makeshift repairs and provisional measures, and the human spirit has likewise struggled on through piecemeal efforts from day to day. Yet how could the myriad things have flourished, and how could the Dao have persisted? Thus, I believe that the rulers of Han–Tang were by no means lacking in expansive capacity and were therefore able to maintain their states alongside Heaven and Earth, and the people relied on them for sustenance.¹³

For Chen, such public and enduring utility constitutes decisive evidence that the Han–Tang embodied the Dao. Consequently, the cognition of the Dao and Dao-tong is grounded not only in textual authority but also in concrete historical achievements.

Chen’s position, however, met with resolute opposition from Zhu Xi. Zhu (2002, 1583) argued that if the Han–Tang rulers were credited with engaging with the Dao merely because they established enduring states, this would reduce moral judgment to a calculus of success and failure. Such achievements, Zhu warned, could arise contingently from

¹² 六經是三代以上之書，曾經聖人手，全是天理 (Li 1986, 190).

¹³ 千五百年之間，天地亦是架漏過時，而人心亦是牽補度日，萬物何以阜蕃，而道何以常存乎！故亮以為漢唐之君本領非不洪大開廓，故能以其國與天地並立，而人物賴以生息 (Chen 2022, 290).

“feigning benevolence and righteousness to serve private interests” (假仁借義以行其私). For this reason, Zhu insisted that any historical utility must be assessed against a transcendent standard so as to determine whether it genuinely manifested the Dao or merely resulted from accidental factors or self-interested motivations. In this respect, Zhu’s critique amounts to a rejection of Chen’s historicism in favor of a metaphysical stance.

Although employing different terminology, Mou Zongsan essentially continues Zhu’s line of critique. Mou (2003e, 266–67) emphasizes that actions driven by instinct or intuition may contingently yield public benefits. Without “self-awareness of moral reason,” such benefits may merely spring from desires like lust, the pursuit of fame, and the craving for power. While these desires, coupled with keen intuition, great intelligence, and strong executive capacity, could accidentally produce enduring public utilities, they remain fundamentally distinct from the conscious practice of the Dao. For Mou, Chen’s approach collapses this distinction by equating accidental outcomes with principled moral action, thereby undermining the universality and transcendence of the Dao.

Admittedly, Chen could further argue that the practical utilities of the Han–Tang period were not merely accidental. However, the critiques advanced by Zhu and Mou expose a broader structural problem inherent in a historicist stance. Historical traditions are intrinsically complex and permeated by contingency. If the Dao and Dao-tong are identified with concrete historical achievements, contingent phenomena risk being mistaken for necessary manifestations of the Dao. This not only weakens the Dao’s universality but also erodes its normative authority over history. Zhu (2002, 1589–92) thus warned that Chen’s conception of Dao-tong could place selfish and unscrupulous behavior on the same footing as sagely action, thereby dissolving the distinction between right and wrong and encouraging moral license. Mou similarly criticized Chen’s view for resulting in the absence of a coherent normative framework and ultimately in moral confusion:

In seeking to appraise history, the transcendent existence was not comprehended, thereby precluding the establishment of a funda-

mental normative principle. Consequently, it led to an absence of moral clarity—or at best, to fragmented and incoherent judgments that are inverted and wide of the mark.¹⁴

Taken together, these critiques articulate the Dao-tong tension internal to the historicist stance: prioritizing the non-deviation of Tong from historical tradition risks collapsing universal principle into historical relativity. For Confucian thinkers such as Zhu and Mou, this relativization threatens the very possibility of moral knowledge and practice. Consequently, if Qian Mu is to maintain a historicist stance, he must respond to these objections by articulating a historicist method capable of mediating the Dao-tong tension from within that stance.

B. Qian's Historicist Method

The historicist stance bears an intrinsic affinity with the plurality of historical traditions. Pushing this logic further, Qian Mu ultimately rejected the Dao's transcendence, thereby resolving the Dao-tong tension by fully pluralizing it. This radical move, however, required philosophical justification in light of the critiques advanced by Zhu Xi and Mou Zongsan. It was under these conditions that Qian introduced the concept of “cultural life,” which became central to his reinterpretation of the historicist method.

Although Chen Liang, several Ming–Qing Confucians, and Qian can all be located within the historicist stance, their methodological commitments differ significantly. Chen and several Ming–Qing Confucians did not reject the Dao's transcendence. Rather, they sought to preserve it while grounding Dao-tong in historical reality—a strategy that, as Qian's later development suggests, left unresolved issues.

Chen's method rests on a distinction between epistemology and ontology. Epistemologically, he holds that the Dao is apprehended through its practical efficacy; ontologically, however, he refuses to identify the Dao with historical tradition. On this basis, Chen em-

¹⁴ 想表現歷史判斷，但不能參透本源，立出綱維，故馴至於無是非，即有是非，亦零碎而無總持，顛倒而不中肯 (Mou 2018b, 195).

phasizes graded differences in public utility. Although both the Three Dynasties and the Han–Tang period engaged with the Dao, he insists that “the Three Dynasties fulfilled it to the utmost, whereas the Han–Tang did not” (三代做得盡者也，漢唐做不到盡者也) (Chen 2022, 297). Degrees of utility thus correspond to degrees of realization of the Dao: rigorous apprehension yields extensive and enduring benefits, whereas limited engagement produces only partial effects. The Han–Tang therefore represent deficiency rather than failure in relation to the Dao. For this reason, characterizing Chen’s position as a “Utilitarian Ethic of End Results” (Tillman 1982, 134) is problematic, as Chen does not equate the essence of the Dao with practical benefits. Instead, while one can recognize the Dao through its effects, it is the Dao itself that dictates the magnitude of these effects. Therefore, practical utility functions not as an ontological definition of the Dao but rather as an epistemological criterion for assessing its apprehension and realization. In this way, Chen attempts to preserve the Dao’s transcendence while drawing Dao-tong closer to historical tradition.

Nevertheless, Chen’s method remains vulnerable on two fronts. First, it risks excluding historical realities that do not readily exhibit practical utility, thereby detaching Dao-tong from the full complexity of historical tradition—ironically mirroring Zhu Xi’s exclusion of the Han–Tang period. Second, and more fundamentally, it fails to resolve the objection raised by Zhu and Mou: practical outcomes may arise contingently. If so, contingent success may be conflated with universal principle. Thus, even without rejecting transcendence in intention, Chen’s method risks undermining it in practice.

Ming–Qing Confucians generally developed new historicist methods to mediate the Dao-tong tension, with Huang Zongxi and Wang Fuzhi as representative figures. Compared with Chen, both sought to reconcile this tension by identifying the Dao’s infinitude with the infinite development of history. Huang articulated this view primarily through intellectual history. Using the metaphor of rivers flowing into the sea, he argued that the plurality of scholarly discourses manifests the inexhaustibility of the Dao itself. On this account, Dao-tong can be understood as the ongoing disclosure of the Dao’s infinite dimensions within history:

The diversity of learning precisely reveals the inexhaustibility of the Dao. Even among the disciples of the Sage, Zeng and Shang, or You and Xia, were never unified. . . . The Dao is like the sea: the Yangtze, the Huai, the Yellow, the Han, the Jing and Wei, and even down to the smallest rivulets, all wind toward it. Though they flow separately, they become one upon reaching the sea.¹⁵

Wang Fuzhi, by contrast, provided a more systematic ontological formulation. By asserting that “under heaven, there are only concrete objects” (*tianxia weiqi* 天下惟器; Wang 2011a, 1027) and that “the Dao is present in the full realization of concrete objects” (*jin qi ze Dao zai qizhong yi* 盡器則道在其中矣; Wang 2011c, 427), Wang collapsed the distinction between the Dao and history, treating them as two perspectives on a single existence. The Dao thus becomes the immanent principle of historical process itself—a dynamic movement through which concrete realities continually realize their normative ground (Tian 2020, 591).

Because Huang and Wang treated the Dao’s infinitude and history’s infinite development as two aspects of the same reality, they maintained that historicism need not undermine transcendence. Yet this method introduces new difficulties. Defining the Dao primarily in terms of infinitude renders its transcendence merely formal. Without a substantive criterion, all elements of historical tradition—including Buddhism and Daoism—would be subsumed under the Dao, an implication unacceptable to Confucians. Moreover, historical tradition is often rife with contradictions. If these contradictory elements were all grounded in the Dao, the Dao itself would become internally contradictory, which is likewise untenable.

In practice, both thinkers attempted to specify the Dao’s substantive content, but this move inevitably reintroduced exclusion. Huang (2012b, 193) identified Chen Xianzhang 陳獻章 (1428–1500), Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), and Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578–1645) as representing the orthodoxy of Ming Confucianism. Moreover, he even implicitly privileged Yangming Learning as Confucian or-

¹⁵ 學術之不同，正以見道體之無盡，即如聖門師，商之論交，遊，夏之論教，何曾歸一？ . . . 夫道猶海也，江，淮，河，漢以至涇，渭，蹄涔，莫不晝夜曲折以趨之，其各自為水者，至於海而為一水矣 (Huang 2012a, 68–69).

thodoxy (Zhang 2017). Wang Fuzhi, for his part, asserted that “Wang Yangming’s learning, transmitted first to Wang Ji and then to Li Zhi, established a teaching without restraint, through which shame and moral integrity were lost, banditry arose, and China fell into ruin.”¹⁶ Contrary to Huang’s elevation of Yangming Learning, Wang thus vehemently rejected it. Once this is the case, however, how do their practices differ from Zhu Xi’s exclusion of the Han–Tang period?

The limitations of the Huang–Wang historicist methods created the theoretical space for Qian Mu to reject the Dao’s transcendence. Yet this move confronted him with two related challenges: how to avoid relativism, and how to account for the continuity and coherence of historical tradition. Since history consists of past persons, events, and objects, it constitutes a meaningful Dao-tong only insofar as these elements are integrated into an ordered whole. If the Dao lacks transcendence, what force can permeate and unify historical reality without reducing it to a mere assemblage of fragments? Qian’s answer to both challenges centers on the concept of “cultural life.”

Qian (2011c, 977) maintains that a culture’s distinctive historical tradition determines its unique identity and endows it with life and spirit. The task of historiography lies precisely in uncovering this “cultural life”:

Historiography is a study of life. . . . It seeks to discern both enduring spirit and constant renewal. This is where the highest meaning and value of humanity reside.¹⁷

This “enduring spirit,” namely “cultural life,” functions analogously to the self-identity of an individual: it grounds self-recognition and distinguishes self from other. Unlike individual life, however, “cultural life” can persist indefinitely through intergenerational transmission (Qian 2011d, 11–12). As such, the Dao-tong is understood as the endless historical process through which “cultural life” continually enriches its material and spiritual dimensions, encompassing eco-

¹⁶ 王氏之學，一傳而為王畿，再傳而為李贄，無忌憚之教立，而廉恥喪，盜賊興，中國淪沒 (Wang 2011d, 371).

¹⁷ 史學是一種生命之學 . . . 要在永恆中，有日新萬變；又要在日新萬變中，認識其永恆持續的精神。這即是人生文化最高意義和最高價值之所在 (Qian 2011d, 12).

nomy, politics, science, religion, morality, literature, and art (Qian 2011e, 32).

However, Qian's negation of the Dao's transcendence inevitably invites the charge of relativism: if good and evil were merely relative, the possibility of moral knowledge and practice would collapse.

Qian's response does not lie in restoring a transcendent foundation but in reinterpreting the source of morality itself. This move is inseparable from Qian's historicist method, which rejects metaphysical grounding and insists that normativity be understood within historical traditions. He therefore does not deny morality but relocates its foundation from transcendence to history. This point becomes clear when contrasted with Mou Zongsan's notion of "cultural life." While some scholars have noted a similarity between Mou's concept and Qian's own (Li 1994; Zheng 2001, 183), their underlying ontologies diverge: Mou understands "cultural life" as the manifestation of the transcendent Dao and as the ontological source of humanity and the universe (Mou 2003b, 296–97). By contrast, Qian's "cultural life" designates the material, social, and spiritual content of a historical tradition, without any necessary reference to transcendence (Qian 2011e, 7–9). This contrast clarifies that Qian's moral horizon is internal to history rather than grounded in a metaphysical realm.

In this sense, morality does not originate in a realm beyond history; it is the core of a "cultural life" (Yao 2023, 45). A "cultural life" is not a metaphysical entity, but a historically formed tradition shaped by concrete conditions such as environment and modes of living (Qian 2011f, 2). Consequently, while moral orientations may differ across cultures, within any given "cultural life" they are neither arbitrary nor indeterminate. In other words, the stability of morality derives not from a transcendent Dao, but from the enduring continuity of a living cultural tradition itself.

Within this framework, a "cultural life," insofar as it is alive, will inevitably experience pathological states that hinder its healthy growth. Evil is therefore analogous to illness, which is unavoidable in any living organism (Qian 2011b, 23). What matters is not the denial of such experiences, but the capacity to overcome them and learn from them so as to restore and sustain health. Dao-tong is thus not a purified

record free of moral failure but the historical process through which a “cultural life” confronts, endures, and continually overcomes its own forms of moral disorder, thereby sustaining its moral vitality.

It is in this sense that “cultural life” becomes the cornerstone of Qian Mu’s historicist method. By rejecting transcendence while affirming a constant value orientation toward healthy growth, Qian redefines Dao-tong as a historical process through which a “cultural life” sustains itself by continually overcoming its pathologies. At the same time, Qian grounds the source of morality in the enduring continuity of a living “cultural life” rather than in any transcendent existence; it is precisely this “cultural life” that secures both the possibility and the necessity of moral knowledge and practice. In this way, Qian succeeds in refining the historicist method through the concept of cultural life.

IV. Beyond Orthodoxy: The Dao-tong Debate as Universal Philosophical Inquiry

The Dao-tong debates have been a persistent feature of Confucian history. Although these debates exhibited occasional sectarian overtones, their deeper source lies in an inherent tension between Dao and tong—a tension intertwined with fundamental oppositions such as normativity and historicity, value and fact, unity and plurality. The very concept of Dao-tong represents an attempt to integrate these opposing dimensions into a single framework, and for this reason it is intrinsically prone to controversy. Even in the modern reinterpretations of Mou Zongsan and Qian Mu, this controversy has not reached a final settlement.

Mou sought to mediate the Dao-tong tension through a philosophy of history. Yet his account ultimately relies on “intellectual intuition” (*zhide zhijue* 智的直覺; Mou 2003f, 47), a faculty that cannot be publicly verified, thereby imparting a dogmatic or quasi-mystical character to his system (Yu 2014, 31–35). This difficulty, however, is not unique to Confucianism. Across the Western philosophical tradition, the question of how transcendence is possible has likewise remained un-

resolved. As Kant (1998, 109–10) observed, metaphysical inquiry into transcendent reality had long been a battlefield of mock-fights with no decisive victory. To this day, this arena remains largely unchanged, as the possibility of transcendence confronts not only Confucians who uphold a metaphysical stance but also the wider philosophical community.

Qian Mu's method for mediating the Dao-tong tension begins with his skepticism toward the Dao's transcendence. In this respect, Qian's stance resonates with the broader anti-metaphysical current of modern Western philosophy, exemplified by logical positivism's rejection of metaphysics as non-cognitive expression of subjective feelings (Neurath 1973, 307). Yet, as Quine (1948) demonstrated, any explanatory framework, insofar as it aims to render the world intelligible, inevitably carries ontological commitments. Viewed from this perspective, Qian's concept of "cultural life" functions precisely as such a non-empirical presupposition. The issue, therefore, is not whether transcendence can simply be negated, but how its form and function are to be reconceived. Furthermore, despite Qian's attempt to ground morality in a "cultural life," his approach remains characterized by an intensely partisan idealization of Chinese historical tradition (Xu 2013, 391–401). This raises a critical question: can Qian's historicist method truly withstand the charge of moral relativism, or reliably sustain a clear distinction between good and evil in practice? Accordingly, upholding a historicist stance in the future must propose more robust and adequate accounts not only of its implicit non-empirical commitments but also of the possibility of normative validity.

If Dao-tong merely signified a contest over Confucian orthodoxy, then, as Fang Dongmei 方東美 (2012, 31) suggested, it could be set aside in favor of the Confucian intellectual lineage (*xuetong* 學統). Yet it persists as an intellectual field in which lies a fundamental philosophical tension: how a singular, transcendent Dao can be reconciled with concrete, plural historical traditions. In this sense, Dao-tong should be understood not as a closed Confucian doctrine, but as an enduring philosophical problematic—one that enables Confucian thought to enter into sustained dialogue with global philosophy, thereby ensuring its continuing intellectual vitality.

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