

Review

*Confucian Liberalism:
Mou Zongsan and
Hegelian Liberalism,*
by Roy Tseng

WING-CHEUK CHAN
Brock University

No one would object that Hegel was the greatest philosopher of the 19th century. But then in the following century Croce raised the question: What is living and what is dead in Hegel's philosophy? Mou Zongsan (牟宗三) is arguably the most important figure in Chinese philosophy of the 20th century. Similarly, one might now raise the following question: What is living and what is dead in Mou's philosophy? Toward answering this question, Roy Tseng's current volume provides with us a solid starting-point. As is well-known, Mou, among the major founders of Modern Confucianism, is unique in developing a new Confucian social-political philosophy. In short, Mou started with a moral metaphysics inherited from the famous Buddhist text, *The Awakening of Faith* as its model. Structurally, this Buddhist system consists of the so-called "One mind opening two gates." In Mou's framework, the One mind is replaced with a transcendental, infinite moral mind, whereas the two gates refer instead to democracy, on the one hand, and science, on the other hand. More importantly, Mou construed the relation between the One mind and the two gates in terms of a self-negation in the Hegelian sense. That is, the journey from the infinite moral mind to democracy and science is understood as a dialectic development. Mou thereby developed a teleological path in modernizing Chinese society. As Tseng succinctly underscored, what Mou tried to achieve is a so-called "Confucian liberalism."

Tseng's volume is the first book dedicated to a comprehensive examination of Mou's social and political philosophy in Western language. In expounding Mou's Confucian liberalism, Tseng explicitly points out that Mou's goal is to provide an alternative in the debate between the conservative Confucianists (seeing modernity as a destruction of the tradition) and the scholars urging for total Westernization (seeing the tradition as an obstruction to modernization). Positively speaking, Tseng argues that Mou's effort signifies an attempt in making possible the "reunion of Confucianism and liberalism" (p. 276). Furthermore, he aims to uncover that Mou's Confucian liberalism is, in reality, perfectionist liberalism. As a definition of perfectionist liberalism, Roy writes that "(it) endorses a nondominant concept of the common good surrounded by a set of Confucian governing and civic virtues" (*Ibid.*).

What is innovative with Tseng's volume is shown in its goal to explore a Hegelian extension of Confucian political philosophy. At this juncture, Tseng particularly links Modern Confucianism to British idealism. In this context, he respectively identifies Mou as the representative of Modern Confucianism and T. H. Green as the representative of British idealism. In short, the core of Tseng's volume

Confucian Liberalism: Mou Zongsan and Hegelian Liberalism.
By Roy Tseng. Albany: SUNY, 2023.

is to show how a Modern Confucian political philosophy is possible in terms of an inter-cultural dialogue between Mou and Green. Note that besides Tang Junyi (唐君毅), no Modern Confucian has knowledge in British idealism. In fact, even Tang's acquaintance of British idealists is merely limited to F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet. To a large extent, up to now Green's name remains unknown, not only to the Modern Confucian, but also Chinese circles in general. In this regard, Tseng has not only done a great service in creating a dialogue between Modern Confucianism and Green's idealism, but is also able to provide a concise but subtle exposition of Green's idealism. In taking care of Green's Hegelian version of ethical liberalism, Tseng's approach is especially significant in trying to re-activate Mencius's idea of the people of fundamental (民本 *minben*). Interestingly enough, in terms of linking Mou's political philosophy to Green's liberalism, Tseng also tries to counterbalance the renowned Chinese-American historian Yu Yingshi's (余英時) challenge that "the connection between Confucianism and the political and social systems was broken, and institutionalized Confucianism died" (p. 280).

In sum, one might appreciate the following major contributions of Tseng's volume.

First, in creating an inter-cultural dialogue between Mou and Green, he shows how Modern Confucianism can concretize Mencius's idea of "humane government" (仁政) as a Hegelian version of ethical liberalism.

Second, in "making better sense of Confucian *res publica* as a nondominant conception of the common good" (p. 279), Tseng introduces Green's perfectionist liberalism. In his eyes, "Green's notion of the common good identified as a 'good for each and all' demands that the state should strive to remove obstacles to every citizen's self-realization, meaning that the business of the state is to create equal conditions for all citizens to attain self-realization by sustaining a system of rights and duties" (p. 241).

Finally, in achieving a synthesis of positive and negative freedom, Tseng relates Modern Confucianism to Green's liberalism. At this juncture, Tseng also justifies his Hegelian, rather than Kantian, line in reconstructing Mou's Confucian political philosophy. For Tseng, this is the only way for Mou's Confucian liberalism to overcome "the two extreme poles of anti-Confucian liberalism and anti-liberal Confucianism" (p. 245).

Seen from a reflective perspective, Tseng should be, first of all, appreciated in being able to stress the important role played by the concept of "individuality" in Confucianism. As is well-known, Hegel complained that the oriental culture lacks the principle of individuality. In fact, although Mou tried to meet Hegel's challenge by arguing that besides moral subjectivity, Chinese culture also appreciates aesthetics subjectivity. However, Mou's solution failed, for it suffers from confusing "individuality" with "subjectivity." In reality, Mou ignored that the individual is defined with reference to community, while subjectivity is defined against objectivity. All this indicates that Mou remains imprisoned within the boundary of monological approach.

To be critical, more importantly, despite Tseng's effort, the whole result achieved in this volume is limited in following idealistic traditions. To be sure, turning to Green's British idealism for help, Tseng is able to go beyond Mou's Kant-Fichtean idealism. Nonetheless, as Habermas observes, neither idealism nor philosophy of consciousness (*Bewußtseinsphilosophie*) can survive in this age of post-metaphysical thinking. Both Modern Confucianism and British idealism are, in essence, different forms of philosophy of consciousness. As a result, they are subjected to the Habermasian critique. This indicates that in order to preserve what Tseng has shown the advantages of a Confucian liberalism, it is necessary to abolish an idealistic philosophical framework. That is, a paradigmatic change to post-metaphysical thinking is necessary. To be more precise, it is only within a framework of communicative rationality that one is able to work out a viable concept of individuality in terms of inter-subjectivity. The fundamental limitation of Modern Confucianism and British Idealism is shown their blindness to the primacy of inter-subjectivity. Indeed, in spite of Tseng's attempt, neither Mou nor Green is able to do justice to the fact that individualization is socialization. Furthermore, if a social-political philosophy is grounded in an idealistic framework which centered on an infinite mind or absolute spirit, then one can hardly explain why it on the political level does not turn to an all-powerful dictator as its corporal representative. In fact, paradoxically, out of Mou's

original expectation, his idealistic political philosophy can well be employed to support the current dictatorship in Mainland China. In this way, to ground a political philosophy upon idealism would rather create an obstruction for its way linking toward liberalism. In my recent work, *A New Interpretation of the Doctrine of Force (qi) and the Threefold Typology of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism* (《氣論與宋明儒三系說新解》, Hsinchu: National Tsing-Hua University Publisher, 2023), I show that Mou's moral metaphysics collapsed in the face of the challenges coming from Zhili's (知禮) criticism against the Shanwai (山外) School, Heidegger's overcoming of subjectivistic metaphysics as well as Habermas's critique of metaphysical thinking. As a matter of fact, even seen from an etymological standpoint, the term "society" in Greek is *koinonia*, and in Latin is *societas* or *communitas*, while the term "state" in Greek is *polis*, and in Latin is *civitas*. All of their meanings indicate the primacy of community. However, such a position is missing in Mou's work. Accordingly, this points to the necessity of a more radical self-transformation of Confucianism.

As a running remark, to my knowledge, Tseng is currently conducting research on the Scottish School. This may help him to recognize that the internalization of Adam Smith's political economy and his theory of moral sentiments, as well as Adam Ferguson's doctrine of the primacy of community, is essential for the future development of Confucian liberalism. Historically, it is a pity that although the major representatives of Modern Confucianism such as Mou and Tang enjoyed the golden age of Hong Kong, they overlooked the function of Adam Smith's political philosophy exercised in this former British colony. Such a limitation also accounts for the necessity for Tseng to reformulate his version of Confucian liberalism.

Finally, it should be pointed out that despite the aforementioned critical remarks on Tseng's volume, one should not undermine its valuable contributions. In particular, Tseng's exploration of Confucian liberalism along the lines of British idealism should be appreciated in terms of following Hegel's viable legacy: a modern state must be founded upon the principle of freedom as its basic idea; the *Folksgeist* functions as the substance of historical development. In this regard, Tseng's volume should be welcomed not only by Western readers but also by Chinese scholars.