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Review: The Historical Significance of the Confucian Discourse

Reviewed Work(s): *The Trouble with Confucianism* by Wm Theodore de Bary;  
*Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* by Patricia Buckley Ebrey; *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* by Benjamin A. Elman; *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi's Ascendancy* by Hoyt Cleveland Tillman; *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* by Wm Theodore de Bary

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## **Review Essay**

# **The Historical Significance of the Confucian Discourse**

Tu Weiming

- The Trouble with Confucianism.* By WM THEODORE DE BARY. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. 132 pp.]
- Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites.* By PATRICIA BUCKLEY EBREY. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. 272 pp.]
- Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China.* By BENJAMIN A. ELMAN. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 409 pp.]
- Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi's Ascendancy.* By HOYT CLEVELAND TILLMAN. [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992. 328 pp.]
- Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart.* By WM THEODORE DE BARY. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1981. 267 pp.]

Joseph Levenson, the late Berkeley intellectual historian, in his subtle and consequential distinction between the two senses of historical significance, underscored the relevance of China's past in illuminating the Chinese present. He seems to argue that the dimension of Chinese history which is heuristic for appreciation of contemporary China is truly significant for us today, whereas an overwhelming majority of past events are merely historically significant. However, while many scholars find that some aspects of the past, including those that have been safely "museumized," may have intrinsic academic value of their own which help to extend educational horizons and thus need not be condemned as "archaic irrelevancies," they do not seem to be particularly relevant for the immediate task of understanding present-day China. Of course, the adjective "historical" can connote a significance much more profound than what is commonly taken to be relevant. Important historical analyses are valuable not because they show their relevance to conceptions of the present but because they broaden and deepen the idea of relevance itself. Yet, Levenson's distinction enables us to establish a sense of priority, a measure for choice, and even a criterion for judgment.

It is not my intention to assert that the books under review are all, in the Levensonian sense, historically *significant*, but taken together they clearly convey the message that the Confucian discourse, while rooted in China's past, is far from irrelevant to attempts to understand vitally important contemporary issues, such as China in transformation.

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Although to establish a facile connection between these focused historical investigations and contemporary China is to trivialize a profoundly meaningful scholarly enterprise, it is significant to ask why highly specialized monographs on the Confucian tradition should be taken seriously in *The China Quarterly*.

The special *China Quarterly* issue on “Greater China” clearly indicates that as “we face a serious problem of how to conceptualize that which we are studying,” including the question of nomenclature, we must admit that a veil of ignorance compels us to re-examine our “most cherished concepts, categories, taxonomies, and models.”<sup>1</sup> In light of this critical self-awareness, the trouble with Confucianism, as Ted de Bary entitles his recent musings on Confucian China and its modern transformation, may not be a culturally specific parochial inquiry and the Confucian dilemma: “whether to repudiate, challenge, or make their peace with a state they themselves had not created, in hopes thereby of rescuing their people from a dire situation not of the Confucians’ own making” (p. 109), though conceptualized as a historical *Problematik*, remains perennial on the contemporary intellectual scene.

De Bary’s characterization of Confucian “this-worldly transcendentalism” (borrowed from S. N. Eisenstadt) as lacking any sense of people’s responsibility to Heaven because of an absence of the idea of covenant is controversial, but his assertion that, as a consequence, “the responsibility for transforming the world falls entirely on the ruler and those who assist him” (p. 12) rings true in the idealist moral elitism of the Chinese intelligentsia today. The Confucian emphasis on the self-cultivation and self-transformation of the “nobleman” for enhancing organic social solidarity may seem incompatible with the doctrine of “struggle” in a peasant-based Chinese Leninism, but, since the Cultural Revolution, the PRC leadership seems to have learned that revolutionary romanticism which celebrates fluid process rather than stable structure is incongruous with the commitment to rapid economic development.<sup>2</sup> If Robert Scalapino’s “authoritarian-pluralism” is to replace Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought as a path towards a more flexible political order in the post-Deng era, the symbolic resources that Lü Liu-liang (Lu Liuliang, 1629–83) and Fang Tung-shu (Fang Dongshu, 1772–1817) tapped to articulate their prophetic messages against autocracy in what de Bary defines as “orthodox Neo-Confucianism” may strike sympathetic resonance among the liberal-minded reformers in Beijing.

One of the most serious deficiencies of the Confucian tradition de Bary perceives is the lack of an intermediate stage between family and state. Since, in the modernist perspective, the family is not sufficient to provide the link between private self and patriarchal state, de Bary contends that “the lack of organized support among an articulate citizenry or from organs of public opinion” (p. 99) was the basic institutional reason for the troubled history of the modern transformation of Confucian China. This

1. Steven I. Levine, review essay, *The China Quarterly*, No. 136 (December 1993), p. 973.

2. Robert A. Scalapino, “China in the late Leninist era,” *ibid.* p. 952.

provides an essential background for the current discussion on “civil society” as a precondition for China’s democratization. De Bary earlier established the claim that there was “liberalism” in both positive identification and negative opposition in the Confucian tradition. While his interpretive position is fundamentally different from that of Lucian Pye who defines Confucianism in authoritarian terms and rejects “Confucian democracy” as an oxymoron, he poignantly portrays the real lapse of the Confucian project as “the failure of an educational system too opportunistically oriented to career goals, and to careers narrowly defined in terms of office-holding in a dominant bureaucracy” (p. 111).

De Bary’s critical reflection on the Confucian project in the modern liberal perspective may be characterized as an “internal” criticism. It is intrinsically comparative, informed by his awe-inspiring erudition and prompted by a burning desire to address the central *Problematik* of liberal education in North America as well as the future prospects of Confucian humanism. His historical analysis from a modernist vantage point is paradoxically a critique of modernity in the spirit of the great tradition. Similarly, the trouble with Confucianism, which evokes a sense of otherness, mirrors in sharp relief current problems confronting American society itself. De Bary transcends the dichotomies of tradition/modernity, East/West, Christian/Confucian, us/them through interpretive praxis rooted in ecumenical humanist concerns. His own prophetic voice is worth noting: “Now the time has come for us to extend and expand the discourse, as a dialogue with the past, with other cultures, and even with future generations, who cannot speak for themselves but whose fate is in our hands” (p. 112). With a view towards the future, we may want to explore further de Bary’s claims that the lack of a sense of the covenant precluded the Chinese people from full participation in the political process and that the lack of a mediating structure between family and state rendered the Confucian cultural elite institutionally ineffectual.

Patricia Ebrey’s informative textual study of family rituals in imperial China addresses a dimension of Confucian institutions, authority and practice that has recently attracted a great deal of attention in social history, cultural anthropology, political culture, comparative religion, Asian philosophy and sociology. The interplay of historical-minded anthropologists and anthropologically informed historians has generated much excitement in Chinese studies. Ritual features prominently in all of these inquiries. *Li* as etiquette, ritual, code of ethics, civilized mode of conduct or way of life is no longer the rarefied subject of classicists or the exotic field of ethnologists; it is part of the ordinary language that students of East Asian studies use. Among East Asianists nowadays, *li* is a widely accepted concept in social description, a fully established practice in anthropological investigation, an intelligent category in religious analysis and a mode of thought in doing philosophy.

Whether or not Ebrey’s study is a corrective to the de-historicized and de-contextualized “history of ideas” approach to Chinese studies, her claim that the Confucian project informed by ritual is an all-embracing “institution” integrating the individual to the state and “the human sphere

with the numinous sphere beyond” can be substantiated in both theory and practice (p. 15). But, as she notes, the early Confucian discourse on family rites rooted in the spirit of ancestral veneration underlines “the principles of hierarchy and organization among the living” (p. 23). While the universality of human feelings is accepted as self-evidently true, the ritual system as elaborated in classical texts expresses difference and differentiation in lived concreteness. Age, gender, generation, status, position and education all matter. The major events marking the critical transitions of the human condition – capping (initiation into adulthood), wedding, funeral and sacrifice – clearly show that ritual, far from being confined to a spiritual sanctuary separable from ordinary daily existence, defines the whole process of learning to be human.

Ebrey’s text-centred narrative of the effort of the new elite (*shidafu*) of the 11th century to redesign ancestral rites as an attempt to define Confucian orthodoxy (the right theory) and orthopraxy (the right practice) has broad implications for understanding the self-definition and public perception of the social role of the scholar-official in Chinese society. While conceptual apparatuses are necessary to help articulate crucial questions such as why knowledge was a form of power and what was the mechanism by which ritual (the *K’ai-yuan-li/Kaiyuanli*) became such an effective ordering and disciplining instrument, Ebrey’s narrative begins to tackle the intriguing phenomenon of how the most refined Confucian minds, such as Ssu-ma Kuang (Sima Guang, 1019–86) and Ch’eng I (Cheng Yi, 1033–1170), could subscribe to a principle of universal applicability and yet remain totally committed to the view that hierarchy is unavoidable, necessary and natural.

One may well argue that it was these scholars’ actual experience in the family and intellectual commitment to the revitalization of its ideal that generated the symbolic resources for advocating an ethic of social responsibility and challenging the heterodox, notably the Buddhist and Daoist, ways of “leaving the family” (*chujia*). Their ability to address the core values of society from a trans-temporal and classless perspective was paradoxically intertwined with their choice to live the life of politically engaged scholars. To them, family seems to have filled that space defined by Hegel as the “civil society” and family ethics featured prominently in their overall conception of politics. The family, both as a metaphor for the microcosmic representation of the generative power of Heaven and Earth and as an instantiation of the path of human flourishing, was a fulcrum bearing much of the weight of the Neo-Confucian revival. Understandably, an enduring contribution of the most influential Neo-Confucian thinker, Chu Hsi (Zhu Xi, 1130–1200) was the composition of the *Family Rituals*. The bulk of Ebrey’s richly documented monograph is devoted to this text as a specific cultural production, as a genre, as a practicable manual and as a way of codifying and reproducing socially approved behaviour. Ebrey concludes that while the late imperial Chinese society as reflected in and manufactured by the *Family Ritual* was hierarchically structured and blatantly gendered, class differences did not become widened as a result (p. 228).

Premodern Chinese society, centred around a highly adaptive family structure and shaped by a seemingly omnipresent ritual, defies any draconian application of the dichotomous mode of thinking, so familiar to the post-Cartesian academic mind that it has virtually become second-nature: subject/object, mind/body, spirit/matter, sacred/secular, good/evil, creator/creature, transcendent/immanent, autonomous/heteronomous, self/society, private/public and particular/universal. Even if subtle issues in metaphysics and epistemology are ignored, this “either-or” approach can hardly account for how power was exercised, authority established or influence exerted in premodern (or indeed contemporary) Chinese society. In *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, Benjamin Elman’s strenuous effort to link kinship with scholarship and politics in late imperial China is a provocative attempt to address power, authority and influence by appealing to indigenous modes of thinking. Elman claims that a focused investigation of the lineage of the Ch’ang-chou (Changzhou) New Text School can help elucidate an historically significant interplay between classical scholarship and political legitimacy in the crucial period between the Ming–Qing transition. He further claims that kinship ties were critical for the transmission of the form of classicism which was rooted in the long history of Confucian statecraft or, literally, “managing the world” (*jingshi*), and was conscientiously reactivated to serve as an ideology for reformist politics in the 19th century.

Elman’s claims seem far-fetched if it is assumed that the state was the locus from which authority to exercise political power and exert moral influence emanated. The contention that members of the gentry, the functional equivalents of the *shidafu* mentioned above, could actually impose their scholarly agenda (laden with far-reaching ideological and political implications) on the autocratic state may, at first sight, appear to be outrageous. Elman’s story, however, is a thought-provoking interpretation of how knowledge entailed power, an observation of the mechanism through which the “knowledge industry” (the production of an authentic classicism) established its own authority, a case study of the “social construction of reality,” and a reflection on the process that cultural production acquired considerable political influence. Elman’s explicit intention to explore the intellectual and social roots of New Text ideas notwithstanding, a more intriguing implication is the efficacy of a seemingly innocuous pedantic pursuit in engendering a reformist ideology of profound political and social consequence.

On the surface, Chuang Ts’un-yü’s (Zhuang Cunyu, 1719–88) scholarly inquiry on the *Kung-yang* (*Gongyang*) commentary of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Sung Hsiang-feng’s (Song Xiangfeng, 1776–1860) exegetical reading of the *Analects* in the spirit of the “subtle words and great meaning” of the Gongyang tradition, and Liu Feng-lu’s (Liu Fenglu, 1776–1829) New Text studies, a transformation of philological decoding into ideological signification, were no more than particularistic academic exercises of a small coterie of highly cultivated classicists. Underlying their pedantic pursuit, however, was a fully acknowledged intent of social criticism and political protest. In the intellectual ethos of late imperial

China, this unique style of doing scholarship, the “family praxis” (*jiafa*), not only delivered a message but also created a magnetic field for those scholar-official aspirants anxious to take part in the conversation of social engagement and political participation. The language of self-cultivation and self-transformation, far from being a private quest for inner spirituality, was a necessary vehicle for “public discussion” (*gonglun*) and the instruction of the Changzhou School, admittedly a “local” phenomenon, was aimed at public service at the highest level.

Actually, Elman’s discovery of the important role that kinship organizations played in fostering the style of learning of the Changzhou New Text School is not crucial to the linkage between classical discourse and political legitimacy. While his thesis that Liu Fenglu, by “transform[ing] Kung-yang Confucianism from an idiosyncratic theoretical position into a legitimate form of Han Learning” (p. 222) and by linking early Confucian notions of restructuring the polity with classical legalism (p. 257), anticipated the late Qing reformers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao as well as Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen needs to be further substantiated, his impressive genealogical work demonstrating the interplay between the Changzhou school of scholarship and the Zhuang–Liu lineage suggests how extraordinary the situation must have been. A fascinating implication is, however, the openness of the school systems and the fluidity the kinship organizations exhibited in fostering scholarship. Strictly speaking, the so-called “family praxis” denotes an idea of fellowship and a discourse community solidified by teacher–disciple relationship; the Changzhou School, as a result, connotes a mode of thought and a way of learning rather than a kinship-based scholarly lineage.

Kinship so conceived extends way beyond the normal confines of the family and substantially fills the perceived space between family and state. The penetration of the state into the affairs of the family and the metaphor of the state as an enlarged family are reflections of the same phenomenon. Part of the reason that the boundaries of the private family and the public state seem confusingly blurred is that a dichotomous conceptualization of private and public is itself methodologically problematical.

Hoyt Tillman addresses this issue in his *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy*. By placing Zhu Xi within the framework of the intellectual discussion of the Southern Song dynasty, Tillman has grounded the Tao-hsüeh (Daoxue, Learning of the Way) movement in the political history of late imperial China. His research into the social networks of the national intellectuals of Zhu Xi’s generation provides a context for understanding the formation of a Confucian fellowship as the result of confrontation, competition and argument as much as consensus building. His analysis of the style of scholarly communication among Zhu Xi’s contemporaries offers a richly textured depiction of the evolutionary process through which Master Zhu emerged as the unchallenged leader of the fellowship of the Learning of the *True Way*. Tillman shows considerable regret, if not profound disappointment

at this outcome: “as this emerging synthesis centered on Chu took hold, Confucianism became unprecedentedly exclusive, as James Liu [Liu Tzu-chien/Liu Zijian] has surmised” (p. 260).

Tillman’s main thesis suggests that the Confucian discourse as defined by the “grammar of action” of the fellowship was instrumental in shaping the narrative of Zhu Xi’s rise to prominence, but, ironically, this so significantly narrowed the scope of the “public” discourse that the fellowship was then perceived to have become “privatized” into a mere faction (*dang*). Tillman’s complex picture of the Daoxue movement and Zhu Xi’s role in it addresses much broader issues than the conflict between private and public. His close attention to confrontational writings and debates covering four discrete moments involving major figures in the Southern Song intellectual landscape vividly portrays the dynamism of the discourse and Zhu Xi’s views on diverse matters such as humane-ness, mental attentiveness, education, the *Book of Change*, governance, expediency and text-centred pedagogy. He is also careful to unpack the loaded “discourse” into the three key levels of speculative philosophy, cultural values and comment on policy.

Tillman’s interpretive strategy, however, is to show that a broadly conceived Confucian agenda which evolved from the 11th century continued to have philosophical diversity, cultural vibrancy and political relevance in the leaderships of Chang Shih (Zhang Shi, 1133–80) and Lü Tsu-ch’ien (Lu Zuqian, 1137–81). When Lu’s disciple Ch’en Liang (Chen Liang, 1143–89) attacked Zhu Xi’s Daoxue by appealing to his historical studies and utilitarian ethic, there was a window of opportunity for “the absoluteness of Chu’s values” to be cracked open. As Chen Liang lost the leadership either by default (premature death) or by choice (leaving the fellowship), Tillman laments, the possibility of Lu’s comprehensive agenda, which encompassed all three levels of the discourse (philosophy, culture and politics), became irreversibly ossified in Zhu Xi’s quest for authenticity and purity in orthodox thinking as transmitted by Cheng Yi. Zhu Xi’s intolerance of Lu Hsiang-shan (Lu Xiangshan, 1139–92) and his principal disciplines’ fight over correct transmission were indicative of this increasingly belligerent exclusivity.

It may not be far-fetched to suggest that a tacit dimension in Tillman’s monograph is a counterfactual argument: had Lu Zuqian’s pluralistic concerns for cultural values and practical affairs triumphed over Zhu Xi’s single-minded inquiry on speculative philosophy, not only would the straight-line path to orthodoxy (from Cheng Yi to Zhu Xi) automatically be relegated to the background but the whole conception of the transmission of the Way would have to be substantially revised. As Tillman sees it, the benefit of this counterfactual argument is not only to explore alternatives but also to show that the sphere of interest of the fellowship was much broader and the intellectual agenda of the discourse more diverse than most traditional and modern historical interpretations have allowed. He confidently concludes that “given Confucian emphasis on human interactions and relatedness rather than individual autonomy” (p. 262), it should not be surprising that the contextualized and historicized

study of “confrontational writings and disputes” offers a more realistic grasp of the group dynamics in shaping ideas and orientations.

There is persuasive power in Tillman’s line of reasoning, but the overall conception of the project seriously undermines Zhu Xi as an original thinker and a cultural transmitter. What Tillman offers, strictly speaking, is not an explanation of Zhu Xi’s ascendancy but an elegy for Lu Zuqian’s premature death and a lamentation of Chen Liang’s undeserved defeat. However, his new perspective is indispensable for future study on Zhu Xi. While his notion of “fellowship” requires further elucidation, the sense of a discourse community prompted by a new way of thinking and sustained by, among other things, exegetical bonding and face-to-face communication, is crucial for understanding Zhu Xi’s symbolic universe.

It is vitally important to note that what Zhu Xi inherited from Cheng Yi, indeed the Northern Song thinkers, was a new world view, a new vision of social reality and a new approach to human flourishing. Central to this was a distinct conception of the heart-and-mind and a balanced, holistic method of self-cultivation. It was not speculative philosophy but “embodied thinking” that empowered Zhu Xi to reconstitute the Confucian tradition by methodically and systematically re-configuring its central values and its core curriculum. It is precisely because Zhu Xi’s thinking was embodied in his quest for self-knowledge, his social responsibility, his political protest and his repossession of the Way in ordinary existence that his “speculative philosophy” entailed the creation of cultural values and the immersion in practical affairs. Of course, the intellectual milieu of the time, social conditions, local knowledge, skilfully nourished or accidentally forged networks, proper timing, and longevity may all have contributed to Zhu Xi’s ascendancy, but he must have tapped richer and deeper symbolic resources than any of his conversation partners in order to create new concepts, categories, taxonomies and models; indeed, the cumulative effect of his meditation on centrality and harmony, essay on humanity, commentary on the Four Books, instruction of the White Deer Grotto and manual on family rituals was the emergence of a new language, a new way of thinking and a new form of life. Scholars today may want to employ modernist, if not post-modernist, perspectives to deconstruct or at least decode Zhu Xi orthodoxy, which, from political expediency, social demand and cultural persuasion, evolved into a formidable ideology for centuries after his death, but they should be aware that before the impact of the modern West in the mid-19th century, the gentry in China, scholar-officials in Vietnam, *yangban* (military and civilian elites) in Korea and samurai-bureaucrats in Japan all accepted Zhu Xi’s dicta as the right path to good life.

De Bary’s life-long work in general and his *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* in particular make a sustained and compelling argument that the Confucian project as shaped by Zhu Xi should be taken as a basic reference point for understanding the moral ecology of East Asia. An appreciation of Zhu Xi’s original core of ideas,

the means by which it was promulgated by such innovative followers as Chen Te-hsiu (Zhen Dexiu, 1178–1235), and the form in which it was sanctified by the state as an official doctrine is a precondition for any critical analysis of the so-called Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. The essentialist supposition that Zhu Xi's philosophy is an established standard against which subsequent changes in East Asian thought ought to be measured is simple-minded, but, as the layered sedimentation of his legacy is explored, it becomes clear that what he has bequeathed is a dynamic process rather than a static structure. Despite the consistency, coherence and integrity in his core of ideas, he not only resisted the temptation to tie up loose ends prematurely but even cherished the value of allowing conflicting perspectives to coexist in tension. There is fruitful ambiguity even in Zhu Xi's most artfully crafted essays.

In three masterly papers, which constitute the book under review, de Bary narrates the rise of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in Yuan China, discusses Zhu Xi's teaching of the mind-and-heart as interpreted by Zhen Daxiu, Hsü Heng (Xu Heng, 1209–81) and several Ming thinkers, and explores Tokugawa thought from the perspectives of orthodoxy and learning of the mind-and-heart. One may wonder, at first, how this trans-temporal and cross-cultural sweep can avoid the danger of dealing with disembodied ideas in a dehistoricized and decontextualized fashion; normally in such a study, the temptation to essentialize abstract ideas as if they mean the same thing in different times and places seems irresistible.

De Bary, however, offers the vicissitudes of a flowing stream with surprising turns and unanticipated currents. His text-driven analysis helps reveal the density and compactness of the shared historical consciousness informed by a collective memory of the core of Zhu Xi's ideas. His thoughtful account tells how Zhu Xi's prophetic voice as heard by Zhen Dexiu became a source of inspiration for scholar-officials of the Yuan dynasty, and how in Huang Kan's (Huang Gan, 1152–1221) "catechism" (p. 13) Master Zhu's message of the Way of the sages underscored the spirit of mental attentiveness and reverence (*jing*) in a precarious political situation. Although the Neo-Confucians were "a disadvantaged minority" (p. 18), they fundamentally transformed Khubilai's court. To appeal to the "mind of the ruler and hearts of the people" (p. 31), Zhu Xi's teaching addresses the "whole substance and great functioning" of humanity with particular emphasis on the practical affairs of governance (p. 101). Understandably, the Confucian model personality is that of an engaged intellectual (such as a cultural transmitter) or a concerned bureaucrat (such as a policy-maker). Zhu Xi's thought may seem more compatible with philosophy and theology, but his general spiritual orientation, "self-cultivation is the basis of government and can be universalized so as to achieve world peace" (p. 114), is always rooted in the real matters of family and state. Yet, it is misleading to characterize Zhu Xi orthodoxy merely in political or ideological terms. In his article on Tokugawa Japan, de Bary takes issue with Professor Ichida Ichiro's thesis that Neo-Confu-

cianism, as an expression of the life experience of feudal Japan, was a sort of “supporting theology” of the Tokugawa system (pp. 202–203).

A tacit assumption underlying de Bary’s interpretation of the Zhu Xi project is that the fellowship that Master Zhu was instrumental in creating became, in a broad sense, an imagined discourse community. Inspired by a coherent moral vision, educated by a core curriculum, seasoned in a well-established ritual process and informed by a vast literature, members of this community actually shared a common language, if not an integrated form of life. In this sense, the literati who served the Mongol court, the Ming thinkers seasoned in Wang Yang-ming’s (Wang Yangming, 1472–1529) rhetoric, the Korean *yangban* scholars such as Yi T’oegyē (1501–70) and the Tokugawa Confucians, notably Fujiwara Seika (1561–1619) and Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) were “fellows” in the same imagined discourse community in a way that, say, the contributors to *The China Quarterly* are not or ever desire to be. The relevance of that imagined discourse community to students of contemporary China partly depends on their judgment of its historical significance for the subjects of their scholarly inquiry, especially concerning the “politics of identity” in the emerging system of interaction among mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, people of Chinese descent around the world, and East Asia.

The trouble with Confucianism, in the traditional Judaic–Christian and modern liberal–democratic perspectives, is its manifold absences: in its overall spiritual orientation, it lacks a strong commitment to individualism; in its basic belief, it lacks ideas of radical transcendence, positive evil and transcendental rationality; in its political philosophy, it lacks concepts of liberty, human rights, privacy and due process of law; in its institutional practice, it lacks the mechanism of checks and balances against autocracy, the adversarial division of labour within a constitutional framework, loyal opposition and total political participation; and in its social praxis, it lacks traditions of social contract, civil society and the public sphere. Furthermore, the verdict that Confucianism’s incompatibility with science and democracy, the two defining characteristics of the modern West, renders it inconsequential or irrelevant to China’s modernization (that is Westernization) has been the consensus of the Chinese intelligentsia, representing a variety of political persuasions (such as pragmatism, liberalism, anarchism, socialism and constitutional monarchism) since the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Understandably, Levenson, in his classical trilogy on Confucian China, concludes that its modern fate was sealed.

In the last two decades, however, the modernization theories themselves, especially the conceptions of economic development, have undergone major restructurings partly because of the emergence of East Asia as an alternative model of modernity. The cultural implications of the rise of Japan, the Four Mini-Dragons and, more recently, the People’s Republic of China are far-reaching. They prompt at least two fundamental conceptual questions, dealing with, first, traditions in modernity (including Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity) and, secondly, the

modernizing process assuming different cultural forms (dare we imagine a Confucian form of modernity!). Explorations of the Confucian discourse informed by ritual, kinship, classicism, orthodoxy and learning of the mind-and-heart help to broaden and deepen the sense of relevance and, perhaps, also to refine existing methodological self-reflexivity.