

Book Review

Roy Tseng: *Confucian Liberalism: Mou Zongsan and Hegelian Liberalism*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2023. Pp. xii, 393.)

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Recent years have seen a surge of Confucian political theorizing. In English, the proposals and debates have centered almost exclusively on democratic and meritocratic Confucian theory. Proponents of both have often been openly hostile to “liberalism,” tending to see it as the ideological competitor of Confucian tradition and values; and even among progressive Confucian theorists, there has been vocal resistance to promoting “liberal” Confucian political views. This is one key way in which Roy Tseng’s *Confucian Liberalism* breaks rank and pushes the conversation in important new directions. Another is in its revisionary account of one of modern Confucian philosophy’s most influential figures, Mou Zongsan (1909–95), highlighting the Hegelian dimensions of Mou’s theory. A third is the connection Tseng draws between this brand of Confucianism and the perfectionist ethical liberalism of the British idealists. In these three moves—liberalizing the discourse, Hegelianizing Mou, and turning toward non-Kantian liberalism—Tseng’s new book makes much needed strides in the field.

Perhaps the most noteworthy Anglophone attempt to outline Confucian liberal thinking since William Theodore de Bary’s *The Liberal Tradition in China* (1982/83), Tseng’s book occupies a unique place in the panoply of recent Confucian political philosophies. It proposes a form of *liberal* Confucian *democracy* that stands in contrast to Tongdong Bai’s liberal Confucian *meritocracy* and Sungmoon Kim’s (and earlier, Sor-hoon Tan’s, and even earlier, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames’s) *non-liberal* Confucian democracy. In arguing that Mou Zongsan’s democratic theory “paves the way” for this Hegelian Confucian liberalism, Tseng also offers a counterpoint to Stephen C. Angle’s and Lee Ming-Huei’s progressive and Kantian developments of Mou. Tseng thus proves distinctive in being liberal, as well as in the kind of liberal theory he advocates.

Confucian Liberalism takes its bearings from the democratic thought of the “modern New Confucians” of the mid-twentieth century, with Mou Zongsan the representative figure among them. Mou takes center-stage (here and among academic philosophers generally) partly because he offers the most systematic theory to work from. Subsequent generations, especially in Tseng’s home of Taiwan, have inherited and developed this theory mainly in its Kantian dimensions. While Mou’s Hegelian elements have not gone

entirely under the radar—Serina Chan and David Elstein clearly outline them in their studies of Mou—Tseng here offers a valuable alternative to the Kantian apparatus that dominates contemporary work on Mou’s theory. His approach may also help counter critics of Mou. For instance, Li Zehou famously rejected Mou’s Kantian–Confucian abstractions in favor of a concrete historicist Confucian liberalism, but Tseng’s account—emphasizing situatedness, relationality, and embodied subjectivity—makes Mou himself more concrete and historical.

The further alignment with British idealism elaborates these underappreciated dimensions of Mou Zongsan and engages versions of liberalism that the discourse has largely—and undeservingly—cast aside. In aligning his Confucian theory with T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and R. G. Collingwood, Tseng proposes a liberal “ethical perfectionism.” Eschewing rather than reappropriating the Rawlsian framework (as many of today’s Confucian political theorists do) allows Tseng to work from friendlier versions of core liberal values: a less atomic and abstract “embodied” individualism, for instance, and an emphasis on the communal value of individuals’ self-realization. It also makes room to work from Mou’s own manner of separating and recombining the moral and political. Here too, Tseng develops resources for countering prevalent criticisms of Mou, who is widely understood as offering merely a Confucian *moral* basis for liberal democratic politics and therein uncritically affirming liberal democracy wholesale. Tseng argues that Mou in fact integrates Confucianism on the political level. He highlights the role of the Confucian ideal of humane government in Mou’s theory, reconceived of as a set of duties or norms that superintend government. In doing so, he outlines the central political importance of virtues of Confucian democratic civility—a novel concept that Tseng constructs effectively from a wide range of sources, including Oakeshott, Shils, and Collingwood as well as classical and contemporary Confucianism. These moves could help counter the prevalent criticism of Mou as a mere Confucian cheerleader for Western institutions.

They *could*—however, in this book they do not. Tseng insists that the “objective form” of democratic political institutions is “definitely *universal*,” not shaped relative to particular cultures (186, emphasis in original). He does so in spite of affirming the essential importance of concrete cultural and historical factors in constructing his framework (and in indicting abstract Kantian liberalism). So, despite radically shifting the grounds of liberal democracy, the normative political implications of this new form of liberalism appear to be a foregone conclusion. The Confucian version of liberalism that Tseng develops seems not to shape the practical apparatus of liberal democracy in distinctive ways. This may be no flaw of the book, since it is more a work of comparative philosophy than one of normative theory, and Tseng’s project is merely to show, *contra* the “anti-Confucian liberals” and “antiliberal Confucians,” that Confucianism can be liberal too (and thus serve as the moral foundation of liberal democracy). However, it is a shame, since Tseng works up a robust and

unique framework through which we *could* fruitfully think through the forms and practices of liberal rights and liberties on the Confucian basis he constructs, if so inclined.

While we may thus worry that Tseng jumps too quickly to the presumed normative *implications* of his theory, we may also be concerned that he has built it on unstable normative *foundations*. His position is nicely captured in his suggestion that the “ultimate aim is to relocate democracy and liberal values into the public good that is embodied in the Confucian lived forms of life, or so to speak, the dictums and matters of ‘humane government’” (207). Here and throughout, Tseng shifts between two kinds of bases: humane government, which is a normative ideal, and Confucian lived forms of life, which are (presumably) empirical, sociocultural phenomena. Whether and how either of these is a valid and valuable basis for theorizing has been hotly debated in recent years. Should we embrace the ideal of humane government because we are Confucian? (If so, what makes us, or any society, Confucian?) Or is humane government a universally valuable ideal, in which case should we all, in any society, become Confucian? (If so, what makes it so valuable?) Since Tseng does not intend the new Confucian foundation to substantively reshape the institutions of democracy, and thus cannot show its value this way, he must explain why we should “relocate democracy” at all.

A third and perhaps minor concern arises from the celebration of “Hegelian” features of Mou’s thought that we could as easily attribute to Confucianism itself. Many of these ideas can be found in classical Confucian teachings and among other, less Hegelian, modern Confucian philosophers. They are even sometimes more pronounced there than in Mou’s thought. Mou’s adoption of Hegelian vocabulary and Tseng’s further engraining Hegel into Confucian theory might do more to obscure than to illuminate Confucianism’s potential relations to liberal ideas.

In the book’s three key contributions, Tseng offers us a valuable starting point for exploring the possibilities of Confucian liberalism. The three limitations I have pointed to suggest that more can and should be done to theorize those possibilities. Tseng has breathed new life into Mou’s once groundbreaking endeavor to root democracy in Confucian morality; and in this, we begin to see the promise and potential of distinctively Confucian forms of liberal theorizing.

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