

BOOK REVIEW

Universal and Particular: Ideological Developments in the Contemporary Chinese Confucian Revival Movement (2000–2020)

Wei Shi. Leiden: Brill, 2023. 252 pp. €115.00 (hbk). ISBN 9789004687936

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For much of the 20th century, the Confucian tradition was basically dead as an intellectual force in mainland China. Yet Confucianism has mounted a huge comeback of late. Whatever the political and economic factors at work, Wei Shi's deeply researched book, based on her doctoral thesis, shows that leading Chinese intellectuals have put forward innovative interpretations of the Confucian tradition over the past 20 years that seek to both buttress Chinese cultural identity and enrich the global debate on universal values.

Her book is not a systematic overview of the contributions of Chinese intellectuals inspired by the Confucian tradition. Rather, it is a detailed exploration of three case studies in Confucian metaphysics, ethics and politics. In each case, Shi argues that Confucian-inspired intellectuals in mainland China put forward both “particular” perspectives that point to the cultural embeddedness of the Confucian tradition and “universal” perspectives that show the global validity of Confucian philosophy.

The metaphysical case study is a heavy-going discussion of Chen Lai's “humaneness-based ontology.” Chen made his mark as an intellectual historian of neo-Confucianism, but he also seeks to defend Confucian philosophy as both highly relevant for China's development (he has been invited for lectures given to Chinese leaders) and as a universally valid philosophy that sheds light on the meaning of life and source of the universe. Shi translates and reconstructs Lai's effort to provide a Confucian metaphysical foundation for modern values, but finds it difficult to hide her scepticism, particularly regarding Chen's claim that Confucian ideas anticipate and pre-date Western ideas of freedom, equality and justice. Some of her criticisms are embedded in brackets and this book would have benefitted from a neater differentiation between presentation and critical evaluation of ideas. (I'd have recommended a separate chapter on critical evaluation.)

The chapter on Confucian ethics is my favourite. Shi discusses the back-and-forth debates between Confucian-inspired defenders of “particularistic consanguineous affection” and those who defend the ideal of “universal humaneness.” Shi shows that these debates raged not just within academia but also influenced legal changes in China that protected family members from testifying against each other in court. I'm curious, however, to what extent legal protection of “mutual concealment between relatives” in China differs from similar protections in other legal jurisdictions. Shi also puts forward her own argument aiming to show that the tension between particularity and universality in Confucian ethics is reconcilable, but here she is less successful. Her argument relies on a dubious interpretation of filiality as respect for tradition as a whole rather than the common interpretation of the ideal as particularistic care and reverence for elderly parents and ancestors. Surprisingly, she doesn't discuss Sun Xiangchen's influential works on family feeling. Nor does Shi engage with sophisticated works on the tension between partiality and impartiality by Chinese intellectuals writing in English outside of China, such as Tao Jiang's book *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China*.

The third case study is an extended discussion of the “return to Kang Youwei” trend among mainland Chinese Confucians. Shi shows that contemporary intellectuals such as Zeng Yi seek inspiration from Kang Youwei’s arguments for a constitutional monarchy, humanistic religion and global governance in the early 20th century as a model for political reform today. From an academic viewpoint, however, these works are less sophisticated than, say, the political philosophy of Bai Tongdong and Joseph Chan (perhaps the latter is not mentioned because he was based in Hong Kong). Shi may overplay the political influence of the “Kang clique,” if only because the more provocative suggestions, such as the defence of monarchy, have been shut down from academic discussion (not to mention public debate) by the Chinese government. Surprisingly, Shi doesn’t discuss Jiang Qing’s detailed defence of symbolic monarchy for China (disclosure: Fan Ruiping and I have edited a translated work on Jiang’s political thought, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*).

Overall, Shi’s book is an admirable effort that both shows the academic importance of the Confucian revival in mainland China and evaluates the efforts of Confucian-inspired intellectuals to translate their ideas into social, legal and political reform. She persuasively demonstrates that leading Confucian thinkers are not chauvinistic nationalists and that they are open to engaging with the rest of the world. But the overall framework that tries to show that Confucian theorizing has both particular and universal significance is somewhat odd. Some Confucian ideas may be closely tied to the Chinese cultural context, and others have more applicability to other societies, but why does it have to be particularity and/or universality as a whole package? If the aim is to promote ideas of political reform in China, why not argue for that position in detail and leave open the possibility of relevance elsewhere, neither foreclosing the possibility nor assuming it without argumentation? It is true that most Western philosophers have made the mistake of assuming that their particular ideals have universal validity without any serious attempt to engage with other cultural traditions, but Chinese scholars working in the Confucian tradition need not partake of the same kind of parochial universalism.