

UMBERTO BRESCIANI

The new confucian movement 2001-2021

Table of contents

Foreword	1
1. A Few Necessary Adjustments	7
2. Milestones	13
3. The Revival as a Whole	45
4. The Philosophical Movement – Diaspora New Confucians ...	59
5. Philosophical Developments of New Confucianism inside China	91
6. A Sampling of Mainland New Confucian intellectuals	137
7. A Forecast of Future Developments (Or “Where is China going?”)	171
8. Tu Weiming’s Project of “Spiritual Humanism”	193
9. Revisiting the issue “Is Confucianism a religion?”	203

FOREWORD

Twenty years after publishing the book *Reinventing Confucianism – The New Confucian Movement*,^[1] – and exactly one hundred years after the publication of *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* by Liang Shuming (1893-1988), widely considered as the first spark, if not the actual start, of the New Confucian Movement - I take up once again the topic of the New Confucian Movement. On my side, at the time, twenty years ago, it was an attempt to describe a philosophical movement that greatly impressed me.

The first half of the twentieth century was a moment in history when the ancient ideology-plus-religion known as Confucianism was fiercely opposed at home and deemed dead in the world at large. In an age when the rage was to destroy the past in order to “modernize” China, the movement had a first start in a few lonely voices, such as that of Liang Shuming, daring to speak in favor of the old ideology named Confucianism. Little by little, those few isolated scholars gradually brought about not less than a reinvention of Confucianism. While the anti-Confucian wave was raging, those isolated and often scorned thinkers worked hard at fathoming the true essence of Confucianism and comparing it with Western culture, which like a gust of wind, or more exactly, like a powerful typhoon, was blowing over China.

The movement acquired renewed vitality with the passing of time, especially after 1949, thanks to a group of scholars taking refuge in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. It reached its most productive period in the decades when Chinese culture reached its lowest ebb, i.e., after Mao Zedong's rise to power foreboded destruction of the "Four Olds." The creativity of the New Confucian pioneers found expression in numerous great books they wrote in their places of exile. In China itself, it was after 1978 that scholars, gradually and cautiously, took Confucianism again into their hands. In a few years, the books and ideas of the movement spread throughout the country, at least among intellectuals, triggering a "cultural fever" (*wenhua re*) in the 1980s, which became a "Confucian fever" (*kongzi re*) in the 1990s. The masses had forgotten most of the Confucian tradition, remembering of Confucius only the negative impact on China's development, as insistently portrayed by the various campaigns against "feudal" culture.

Developments of these last twenty years have vindicated the feeling I had at the time I was writing my book. In fact, in my view, the whole thrust of the May Fourth and New Culture Movements was not a rational or pondered reaction to the encroachments of Western culture, but rather a bout of rage, an impetus of exasperation, vented against their cultural past, coming especially from the younger generations of intellectuals, facing the weakness and backwardness of their country vis-à-vis foreign powers. As I was thinking, once China could emerge from its disastrous situation of weakness, there should be a swing back, a return to a serious appreciation of its own national culture and values. This is exactly what has been happening in the last decades, gaining steam over time, and accelerating and intensifying during the present century.

There is ample evidence that Confucianism is undergoing a multi-faceted revival in contemporary China. The impressive

growth of momentum of Confucianism in Chinese society in the last two decades (2001-2021) easily deserves an entire book. As a matter of fact, numerous books have been written on the various aspects of the Confucian revival that has been taking place. ^[2] In this essay, I am not planning to repeat the stories already told; I will, instead, after a brief general survey, concentrate on the philosophical side of the phenomenon, adding some considerations about possible future developments, and two supplementary chapters, one introducing Tu Weiming's cultural project, and the other evaluating a possible role of Confucianism in the world's future.

The contents of this essay is structured in nine chapters, as follows: a first chapter containing a few adjustments to *Reinventing Confucianism*, to make up for a few weak points in my previous book; a second chapter that lists notable milestones in the revival movement of Confucianism during these two decades; a third chapter that takes a general look at the revival movement, both in China and in the world; a fourth chapter that deals with the philosophical developments of the last two decades in various areas, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States; a fifth chapter that deals with the philosophical developments of the last two decades in China mainland; a sixth chapter, which introduces a sampling of a dozen figures of Confucian intellectuals belonging to the Mainland New Confucian Movement; a seventh chapter, which attempts to offer a few hints of a forecast for the future; an eighth chapter that introduces Tu Weiming's project for a "spiritual humanism;" finally, the ninth chapter revisits the issue of Confucianism-religion, that in my view bears a very special significance for the future of humankind.

If we take a look at the whole New Confucian Movement, both of the last century, as it developed up to 1978, and in the following decades until now, we may see through it an overall effort to redis-

cover the real essence of Confucianism, and a debate whether Confucianism should exist only as an object of academic study, or as a player in today's social and political life. The hot present debates among Chinese Confucian intellectuals about universal values, democracy, freedom, international relations, world order, future of humankind, all reflect the same concern: "what does it mean to be Confucian now?"

Regarding the New Confucian Movement, a difference still exists between those scholars, thinkers, or philosophers who are deeply involved in studying Confucianism and reviving it (broad sense), and those associated with the Xiong Shili line of thought, i.e., the disciples of Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan (strict sense), espousing a system of philosophy strictly connected with Song Neo-Confucianism, and viewing Confucianism primarily as a metaphysics, in dialogue with Kant or Hegel, and often tinged with Chinese cultural nationalism.

In the closing page of my reinventing Confucianism, I stated that "we are facing a movement which has much room to grow and develop further." Presently, after these twenty years that passed by, and after a Mainland New Confucian Movement has started to exist, I must add that the room to grow is even larger than before. The Confucian philosophers of the three generations occupied themselves with numerous issues, mainly with comparative metaphysics and epistemology, and of course ethics. The New Confucians of today are still busy with metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics; but many of them – especially the Mainland New Confucians (briefly MNC) – are busy with a larger variety of issues, primarily with political science and international relations, as well as religion.

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- 1 Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism – The New Confucian Movement*, Taipei, Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 2001.
 - 2 See, for instance, Makeham, John, ed., *New Confucianism, A Critical Examination*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Shu-Hsien Liu, *Essentials of Contemporary Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003; Makeham, John, *Lost Soul : ‘Confucianism’ in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008; Billioud, Sébastien & Thoraval, Joël (2008), "The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism: *Anshen liming* or the Religious Dimension of Confucianism". *China Perspectives* (3), 104; Tu Weiming and D. Ikeda, eds., *New Horizons in Eastern Humanism: Buddhism, Confucianism and the Quest for Global Peace* (2011); Ruiping Fan, *The Renaissance of Confucianism in Contemporary China*, New York: Springer, 2011; Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy, Toward Progressive Confucianism*, Polity Press, Cambridge [UK], 2012; Chung-ying Cheng and J. Tiwald, *Confucian Philosophy: Innovations and Transformations*, Wiley & Blackwell, 2012; Chen Yong, *Confucianism as Religion: Controversies and Consequences*, Leiden: Brill, 2013; Sun, Anna, *Confucianism as a World Religion—Contested History and contemporary realities*, Princeton University Press, 2013; Stephen Angle & Michael Slote, eds., *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, Routledge, 2013; Jesus Solé Farràs, *New Confucianism in Twenty-first Century China – The Construction of a Discourse*, New York: Routledge, 2014; Kenneth J. Hammond and Jeffrey L. Ritchey, *The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary China*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2015; Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; 250-270; James A. Flath, *Traces of the Sage – Monument, Materiality, and the First Temple of Confucius*, Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2016; Ady Van den Stock, *The Horizon of Modernity – Subjectivity and Social Structure in New Confucian Philosophy*, Leiden: Brill, 2016; Tze-Ki Hon, Kristin Stapleton, eds., *Confucianism for the Contemporary World: Global Order, Political Plurality, and Social Action*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017; Sébastien Billioud, ed., *The Varieties of Confucian Experience – Documenting a Grassroots Revival of Tradition*, Leiden: Brill, 2018; Anna Sun, "Thinking with Weber's Religion of China in the Twenty-First Century", *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, 7 (2020). Chin-shing Huang, *Confucianism as sacred space: The Confucius Temple from Imperial China to Today*, Columbia University Press, 2020; Umberto Bresciani, *Confucian Holy*

Places, Online Edition, Passerino Editore, March 2021. Richard Madsen, ed., “*The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*,” Leiden: Brill, July 2021.

1. A FEW NECESSARY ADJUSTMENTS

Twenty years ago, in my book *Reinventing Confucianism – The New Confucian Movement*, I drew a portrait of the New Confucian Movement through a profile of eleven pivotal representative figures, belonging to a first and a second generation of scholars (chapters 3-13), plus four representatives of the third generation (ch. 14), implying that these last four names were not the whole picture of the movement at the time, but simply a list of some of the most outstanding and promising figures. Presently, my feeling is that the overall historical portrait I offered was basically correct, although I recognize that it was approximate, and could have been more detailed. In particular, the chapter on developments inside China mainland could have been more specific about numerous new ideas and happenings, which are now documented much more abundantly in various publications.

Regarding my presentation of the “First Generation” of New Confucians, I realize that in my narrative I failed to distinguish two groups of figures. As certain scholars have rightly argued, ^[1] two different groups of thinkers - some would even talk of two different “generations” - can be identified among the outspoken Confucians of the time, namely, an earlier batch of isolated voices of defense of the Confucian world-view, such as Liang Shuming, Ma Yifu, Xiong Shili, and Zhang Junmai; and a second group of younger, and most

of them partly Western-educated, philosophers, such as Feng Youlan, He Lin, Qian Mu, and Fang Dongmei.

Another point in my book deserving a clarification is the classification of the eminent philosopher Fang Dongmei as a representative of the second generation. His name has just appeared among the second group of the first generation. As a matter of fact, Fang Dongmei, who was also teacher of Liu Shuxian, Cheng Zhongying, Shen Qingsong, Fu Peirong, and many others, should rightly belong to the first generation, more correctly to the second group just mentioned. Fang Dongmei, no doubt, was a peer of Feng Youlan and He Lin. In my book, I located him in the second generation – which was mainly active and prominent in the decades after 1949 – for historical correctness, considering that in China in the 1930s and 1940s Fang Dongmei was a distinguished university professor teaching Western philosophy, a son of the May Fourth Movement, and an admirer of John Dewey and Henry Bergson. It was during the years of the Sino-Japanese war that he gained a renewed interest in Chinese philosophy. In 1947, he took up a teaching job at National Taiwan University (Taipei), just recovered from Japanese occupation. It was there that he became an outspoken defender of the great value of Chinese philosophy, both in his university teaching and in illustrating it to Western intellectuals through books written in the English language. Therefore, my motivation was to stress that Fang's significant presence and active contributions in the New Confucian Movement belonged mainly to the period after 1947, lasting until his death in 1978. When considering his age, of course, he should belong to the earlier generation, not to the same generation as Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, and Xu Fuguan.

At the time when I compiled my book, very few panoramic views of the New Confucian Movement were available. Since then, numerous authors have been writing about it from various angles. One that