

Chinese Modernity and Transcultural Critique: Reflections on the Confucian Manifesto of 1958

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Wednesday October 1st, 2008 9.00 - 11.00 Lipsius building, LUF room (148)



Abstract

In Europe the rise of modern China is now often perceived as a challenge or even a threat, but it would be a mistake to restrict understanding and analysis to the level of economics and politics. If we look at the intellectual history of modern China we will easily find examples of an attitude of learning from the West, which stresses the necessity to study, in depth, the development of European thought and culture. Contemporary Confucianism is one such example. Since the fall of imperial China, it has ventured to connect Chinese modernity with the resources of traditional Chinese culture. Thereby self-cultivation has served as a leitmotiv of major importance, because it intertwines the attempt to reconstruct Confucian ethics through the notion of moral subjectivity and an ethos of learning, which allows the recognition of Western science and democracy.

Today it is still difficult to assess the radical dimension of the New-Confucian Manifesto of 1958, signed by four eminent Chinese philosophers living in exile (Carsun Chang, Tang Chun-i, Mou Tsung-san and Hsu Fo-kuan), because for decades the Confucian approach has been overshadowed by communist anti-traditionalism. It seems, however, that the historical development since the end of the cultural revolution shows radical anti-traditionalism to lack insight into the complexity of Chinese modernity, whose hidden potential seems to consist in the ability to accept the challenges of modernity, without breaking with the cultural and historical heritage of China. Insofar as contemporary Confucianism deliberately developed a double-sided criticism, directed against certain aspects of pre-modern China (before 1840) and against certain aspects of the modern West, it has chosen a position, which, at first hand, has been marginalized by the violence of history, but now increasingly reveals its farsightedness. Only recently critical, "leftist" intellectuals in China try to overcome their blindness towards tradition and have entered into a post-ideological examination of China's cultural and historical resources. Out of this situation emerge new forms of critical and transcultural theory.



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