Situating strategic or hybrid Confucianism(s): Issues and problematics

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Abstract
This commentary reviews the arguments made in An et al.’s ‘Towards a Confucian Geopolitics’. Particularly, I consider An et al.’s main claim that a form of strategic and/or ‘hybrid Confucianism’ has played a significant role in the construction of contemporary Chinese geopolitics. While I accept aspects of this argument, this commentary also raises further theoretical and empirical issues that are immanent within the work. I draw attention to: (1) concerns relating to the historical narrative constructed by the authors; (2) problematics relating to the recent diversity of contemporary Confucian discourse; and (3) questions relating to the geographies of Confucianism.

Keywords
Chinese culture, Confucian geopolitics, Confucianism, Mainland New Confucianism, neo-Confucianism, strategic Confucianism

Introduction
In recent years, scholars have drawn links between Confucianism and contemporary Chinese geopolitics (e.g. An, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Latham, 2007; Zhang, 2018). In their article, An et al. (2021) explore the historical evolution of Confucian philosophies before investigating the ‘national foreign policy texts of the Chinese government’. An et al.’s (2021) article is divided into three sections. Part 1 examines a broad history of classical Confucianism, including an analysis of its ‘geopolitical dimensions’. Part 2 investigates the role of Confucian ideas in the ‘geopolitical narratives of the modern Chinese state’, and Part 3 unpacks their proposal that contemporary Chinese geopolitics is best viewed through the lens of a ‘hybrid Confucian geopolitical theory’, which allows for ‘the entanglement of the [SIC] Chinese cultural values with the geopolitical narratives of today’. In summarising their theories, An et al. avoid viewing Confucianism as a straightforward entity, and acknowledge its diverse iterations across history, while also recognising the ‘continuity’ of a traditional and classical philosophy. Secondly, in examining contemporary geopolitics, the authors also accept that the contemporary Chinese administration has adopted a tactical interpretation of Confucianism that is a ‘strategic
blend of the traditional Chinese philosophy of Confucianism along with communist elements and other external geopolitical theories’ (An et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, their paper also raises several issues and problematics that deserve further analysis. In this commentary, I draw attention to three of these issues and problematics. Part 2 will firstly examine the absence of historical material on the modern era and specifically the Republican period in their paper. This section draws attention to the rise of Republican era Confucianisms (Confucianisms that were hybrid in character) and asks whether these Confucianisms have influenced Chinese culture and Chinese politics in the present. Part 3 then explores the emergence of new forms of intellectual Confucianism in the post-Maoist era and specifically, I examine varieties of Confucianism that have emerged in the recent past. In investigating this range of contemporary Confucianism(s), I consider how these new intellectual strands have and are influencing Chinese culture and politics. Given that some of these strands suggest alternatives to the current political order, I examine how different contemporary discourses of Confucianism interact with and affect contemporary Chinese political (and geopolitical) culture. Finally, Part 4 of this comment addresses the singular analysis of mainland Confucianism within An et al.’s paper. While I agree with the idea that Confucianism has its roots in the ancient history of the mainland, research has also contended that, from the 16th century, modern Confucianism was constructed and reconstructed via transnational colonial, post-colonial, and western-inspired movements.

**Historical problematics?**

A first issue within An et al.’s analysis lies with their historical narrative. While An et al.’s study broadly covers the development of Confucianism in both ancient and Imperial China, except for a short discussion on the Maoist era, we learn little about the development of this philosophy in the modern period. One conspicuous absence in their historical narrative is a discussion of the New Confucianist movements that emerged in the Republican era (1911–1949). Indeed, Dirlik has contended that Chinese historians have given less attention to the New Confucians of the Republican era. Dirlik states that ‘[i]f the New Confucians were relegated to the margins of modern Chinese history in the consciousness of historians (and many Chinese), the reasons may have less to do with Confucianism than with the consciousness of historians’ (Dirlik, 1995: 235).

In the 1930s, the ‘Contemporary New Confucianism’ (as it was known) included prominent thinkers such as Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and Tang Junyi (1909–1978) who ‘reaffirmed the intrinsic worth of the Confucian tradition and sought a reinterpretation of Confucianism as an ethico-spiritual system of values that could accommodate science and democracy’ (Dirlik, 1995: 234; see also Angle, 2018). Importantly, as Dirlik has suggested, while not ‘bound’ to the movements of the 1930s, the revival of post-Maoist Confucianism in the 1980s is a ‘direct heir to the reinterpretation of Confucianism by the New Confucians’ (Dirlik, 1995: 236). Angle (2018) has also noted that in the post-Maoist era (particularly in the 1990s) a new generation of Confucianists – sometimes described as Mainland New Confucianists – took the ‘New Confucianism of Mou Zongsan and others seriously as a philosophy of life’, which also included a ‘concomitant scepticism about Marxism’ (Angle, 2018: 85). If we agree with Dirlik and Angle’s suggestions, we might ask further questions about An et al.’s theory: is the hybrid Confucianism that they discuss a reiteration of a pre-modern narrative of Confucianism or is it in fact a reiteration of an earlier Republican form of Confucianism (a Confucianism that was also hybrid)?

**The diversity of Confucian political discourses?**

A second problem with An et al.’s (2021) analysis rests with their discussion of the varieties of strategic, or hybrid, Confucian discourses. Indeed, they suggest that ‘[d]espite its constant transformation, Confucianism never deviated extensively from its basic ideals’. For An et al., these ideals include norms relating to moral activism (which can embrace ideas relating to morality and profit) and norms relating to individual ‘moral cultivation’ (which can include concepts relating to good ‘moral character’, especially for the purposes of participating in public governance).
However, their analysis does not address modern or recent philosophical debates, which have pointed to a series of diverse and conflicting interpretations regarding this body of thought. Thus, in the post-Maoist era, Angle (2018) has discussed the rise of what has been termed ‘Mainland New Confucianism’; a new movement of Confucianism associated with the works and writings of Jiang Qing, (b. 1958), Chen Ming (b. 1962), and Kang Xiaoguang (b. 1963). Of these writers, arguably Jiang Qing has been the most influential, and has been associated with a political brand of Confucianism based on the “Gongyang learning” prominent in the Han Dynasty which is concerned with ‘creating institutions that would sustain political order’ (Angle, 2018: 86; see also Jiang, 2013). In addition to these earlier post-Maoist Confucianist thinkers, Angle has pointed to a recent wave of thinkers where ‘Jiang Qing is playing much less of a role’ (2018: 84). These thinkers include writers such as Li Minghui, Zheng Yi, Fang Xuedong, Chen Ming, Tang Wenming, Chen Yun, Huang Yushun, and Guo Qiyong, who interpret Confucianism from a variety of viewpoints. Specifically, these writers have been associated with a number of debates including discussions about tradition, questions around Confucianism’s potential status as a civic religion, and broader political debates regarding issues of modernity and democracy (see Angle, 2018, for an in-depth discussion). Arguably, an understanding of these different strands of Confucianism is important if we are to recognise the role of dissident Confucian discourses within China’s political culture and within the state itself. Thus, as Daniel Bell has suggested, Jiang Qing has presented a new form of ‘Confucian constitutionalism’ which presents a ‘systematic alternative to both the current regime [meaning the current Chinese government] and western style liberal democracy’ (Bell, 2013: 1).

Geographies of Confucianism: Beyond the mainland

Third, an important issue within An et al.’s analysis is their singular historical analysis of Confucianism within the Chinese mainland. Thus, although Confucianism has its ancient historical origins within the Chinese mainland, hybrid forms of Confucianism also have ancestries beyond its borders. In his book, Manufacturing Confucianism (1997), Lionel M Jensen has pointed to the role of 16th-century Jesuits in the production of the Latinised linguistic signifier ‘Confucius’ and a new imaginary of Confucius that did not exist prior to their arrival (see Jensen, 1997: 33; for a discussion of the linguistic origins of the term Confucius, see Jensen, 1997: 81–86). Indeed, as Jensen suggests for the native Chinese, Confucius was a ‘man-god, a shangren, who was the object of an imperial cult, the ancient ancestor of a celebrated rhetorical tradition, and a symbol of a scholarly fraternity (the ru, or “Confucians”)’ (Jensen, 1997: 33). However, in the hands of the Jesuits, Confucius was transformed into ‘a spiritual confere who alone among the Chinese – so their version had it – had preached an ancient gospel of monotheism now forgotten’ (Jensen, 1997: 33). However, in the early 20th century, a new era of Chinese intellectuals including Zhang Binglin (1868–1936) and philosopher and essayist Hu Shi (1891–1962) created a ‘master fiction’ of Confucius ‘for the Chinese and for us’ (Jensen, 1997: 173, 27). Here, as Jensen contends, these scholars reconfigured ideas of Confucius through a narrative of ‘socioreligious evolution in which ru were defined as priests’ (Jensen, 1997: 26). Rather than seeing a contemporary discourse of Confucius and Confucianism as a fraudulent western narrative, Jensen claims that the Jesuit construction of Confucius/Confucianism represents ‘a reverent account of an ecumenical impulse or spirit, definitive of a modern temper found in the Renaissance, forgotten since the seventeenth century in the west, and recovered in the twentieth century in China’ (Jensen, 1997: 5).

Moreover, the Contemporary New Confucian movements associated with Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) and Tang Junyi (1909–1978) have been called “Hong Kong/Taiwan New Confucianism” by some in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’ (Angle, 2018: 84). Indeed, as Angle has pointed out, Mou and Tang left the Chinese mainland ‘prior to the Communist Revolution’ and spent ‘the rest of their lives in Hong Kong and Taiwan’ (Angle, 2018: 84). Furthermore, as Dirlik has suggested, the emergence of a post-Maoist Confucian revival in China can be viewed as belonging to a broader East Asian revival based on a ‘global post-colonial discourse’ (Dirlik, 1995: 230). Here, Dirlik is referring to the
idea that the renewal of Confucianism in post-Maoist China and beyond owes much to an ‘ideological legacy of societies that can claim recent ascendancy within Global capitalism and, indeed in some measure, are responsible for creating the practices that characterise Global Capitalism’ (Dirlik, 1995: 230). In addition, the Sinologist Harriet Zurndorfer (2004) has, asserted that in the late 1970s:

> a number of North American academics who were former students of Neo-Confucian philosophy masters in Hong Kong and Taiwan, seized the opportunity of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) newly-instituted gaige kaifang (reform and opening up) strategy to cultivate and promote an historical genealogy which tied that current policy to commercial practices of 16th-century China. (Zurndorfer, 2004)

As Zurndorfer points out, by the 1980s, the administrations of Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea ‘gave official approval of Confucian values as a collective guide to economic practices, and by the 1990s, the PRC authorities sanctioned historical Confucianism a major component of China’s intellectual tradition and modern-day economic progress’ (Zurndorfer, 2004: n.p.). Here like Dirlik, Zurndorfer’s main point is that the emergence of post-Maoist Confucianism in East Asia (including China) is ultimately part of a ‘present-day economic initiative’, which has linked ‘a globalized capitalist world with a 2000-year old cultural legacy’ (Zurndorfer, 2004: n.p.). In this regard, we might ask whether the contemporary hybrid Confucianism that An et al. are discussing is a continuation of a mainland Chinese discourse; or is this hybrid Confucianism the result of western colonial Jesuit interventions and/or post-colonial global capitalist interpolations that have transformed mainland Chinese culture.

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