CHAPTER 2

Critical Issues in Research on Modern Confucianism

Stereotypes and Omissions

One of the reasons it is worth studying Tang’s modern Confucianism is because he did not fall into the culturalist trap of juxtaposing a universalistic, rationality-based Western form of modernity with an emergent, and allegedly superior, Eastern one. He thus never maintained that by reconstructing Confucian traditions it was possible to find a cure-all for the downsides of modernity. In most cases, culturalist juxtapositions rely on a static conceptualization of (Western) modernity that rests on makeshift analyses from the social sciences. Furthermore, there is often a strong normativist tendency to hypostatize the value orientations of individuals and groups who are afflicted by modern transformations and the presumed impact they have had on social history. Confucianism has been ascribed eminent importance as a cultural resource for the formation of such value orientations, and hence, for China’s course in the modern world. A culturalist outlook on the process of modernity was already common in the earlier critique of modernity in Western philosophies of life, whose representatives, above all Rudolf Eucken and Henri Bergson, had gained considerable influence in China in the early 20th century. Further congruities can be retraced to strands of European romanticism of the 19th century, which expressed skepticism towards scientific-technological world views. That said, it is possible to assert that the juxtaposition of Confucian traditions and Western modernity is actually a byproduct of earlier Western criticisms of modernity, which had been introduced to China alongside the dominant Western models of modernization. As a matter of fact, a considerable number of Confucian positions are, wittingly or not, “Westernized” in this sense.

Tang Junyi’s thought on the role of Confucianism in the contemporary world is not consistent with stereotypical Confucian models of modernity. He neither maintained that there are perennially valid ideas in Confucian political and social thought, nor did he anachronistically insist on the unqualified validity of Confucian notions of rule, rituals, or self-cultivation. It is thus ironic that Tang’s modern Confucianism, and especially his political thought, are often discussed in an anachronistic way. The kind of anachronism at work here might be labeled an “anachronism due to topical omission.” To be precise, the problem is one of not addressing topics and questions that actually constitute
key issues in the body of texts under examination. This neglect stems from a reductionist approach that interprets Tang's writings through the lenses of Confucianism's allegedly perennial concerns. Such distorted interpretations seek to reclaim Tang's thought for a historical lineage of neo-Confucianism and, consequently, as a manifestation of “traditional” Confucianism in modern times. The very concerns of Tang's philosophy that clearly distinguished him as a thinker of the 20th century, as compared to his Confucian predecessors, hence tend to be relegated to the background.

More generally, the narrowing of the discussion of contemporary Confucianism to such allegedly enduring Confucian concerns (e.g. the formation of the moral self, the role of rituals and hierarchies in social and political orders, and the transmission of authoritative scriptures) may simply accommodate expectations that a cultural code of “Confucian China” can be deciphered. In its extreme form, this produces the culturalist cliché of a Chinese modernity which is easier to understand than its Western counterparts due to its alleged Confucian identity. Anachronistic approaches based on topical omission bolster this reductionist culturalism and neglect issues in modern Confucian thought that do not coincide with the cliché of Confucianism or comply with the stereotypical dichotomies. This may help explain why those elements of Tang's political thought which are highly critical of traditional Confucian ideas, or simply absent from the tradition, are readily overlooked by interpreters bound by commonplace views of Confucianism.

As a matter of fact, Tang's political thought in general has only attracted scant attention. While such neglect may not be entirely caused by an anachronism due to topical omission, it is nonetheless consistent with a reductionist view of Tang's modern Confucianism. In the Chinese-speaking world, the focus of research has been on Tang's metaphysical speculation, moral philosophy, religious thought and ideas on humanistic culture. Similar tendencies can be observed, for example, in the work being done on Tang's long-time intellectual companion Mou Zongsan.¹ There is no comprehensive study on Tang's

¹ Tang had first met with Mou in 1939; see Cai, Mou Zongsan xiansheng xue si nianpu, p. 9. The number of studies on Mou Zongsan's philosophy clearly exceeds the number that has been done on Tang's. What is more, there are some signs of an intellectual split among students and followers of Mou and Tang in Hong Kong and Taiwan; for an excellent overview of research about modern Confucianism and the manifold attempts of Chinese scholars to identify intellectual schools and traditional teacher-pupil constellations with respect to 20th-century Confucianism, see Makeham, “The Retrospective Creation of New Confucianism” (on evaluations of Tang and Mou: pp. 40–41) and “The New Daotong” (on Liu Shu-hsien's preference for Mou Zongsan in comparison to Tang: p. 66).
critical issues in research on modern confucianism 25

political philosophy to date. Tellingly, in a recent collection of Confucian political writings published in China, one finds an extensive collection of political texts by modern Confucian thinkers, but not a single one by Tang.2

Overall, the main body of research on Tang's political thought is still very limited in terms of the quantity, topics, and analytical scope.3 The consequence of this precarious state is exemplified by a recent volume on contemporary Confucian political philosophy. It covers topics from the fields of political ethics to philosophy of law, but mentions Tang only in passing and without reference to any of his writings on political philosophy.4 Such neglect of his

2 See Wang (ed.), Rujia zhengzhi sixiang yanjiu.
3 Since the publication of the pioneering article by Liu Guoqiang in 1991 entitled "Tang Junyi de zhengzhi zhexue," little more than a dozen articles on Tang's political philosophy had been published by 2011, about half of them dealing with Tang's concepts of democracy and freedom. Lau Kwok-keung's article also deserves special mention for it offers a concise introduction to other main topics of Tang's political thought (including the concepts of state and power) and briefly discusses Tang's interpretation of Locke, Hume, Bentham, Mill, Rousseau, Marx, and Hegel. In addition, Lau's article discusses the relation between Tang's political thought and his moral-metaphysical speculation. Last but not least, Lau draws the reader's attention to Tang's book Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing, a major source for his political philosophy. Thomas Metzger's discussion of Tang's political thought in Chap. 2 and 13 of his A Cloud across the Pacific. Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today is pathbreaking in that it (re-)introduces Tang to an English readership outside the small circle of those who were familiar with Tang's philosophy—a task that Metzger had first taken up in his highly influential Escape from Predicament. Metzger's conclusions are challenging in many respects and these will be discussed in the course of this book. Unfortunately, the scope of Metzger's analysis is very restricted, for he excludes seminal texts of Tang's political philosophy. Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing, for instance, is not discussed by Metzger at all, and the same holds true for some of Tang's key texts from Renwen jingshen zhi chongjian and Zhonghua renwen yu dangjin shijie bubian. It is in those texts that Tang developed his concepts of the will for power, evil and politics, all of which are crucial for an interpretation of his political thought. Zhang Xianghao provides a brief overview of Tang's political ideas, including a criticism of Tang from an explicit Marxist-Leninist perspective; cf. Zhang, Tang Junyi sixiang yanjiu, pp. 145–168. According to Zhang's interpretation, Tang failed to distinguish between the normative spheres of politics and morality. This inaccurate interpretation not only overlooks the critical import of Tang's political philosophy, but falsely depicts him as a thinker still steeped in traditional Confucian political thought. As regards Tang's conception of history, which is also relevant for his political thought, the recent monograph by Huang Zhaqiang provides highly valuable insights; see Huang, Xueshu yu jingshi—Tang Junyi de lishi zhexue ji qi zhongji guanhuai.

4 See Angle, Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy. In his Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy, Angle speaks of Tang Junyi as "a good example" of an "antidemocratic elitist" among the "believers in sagehood," bolstering this statement with
political thought is deplorable because it means an important voice is absent from the discussion of Chinese political thinkers of the 20th century. Tang’s concept of political power, his theory of state, his thoughts on the relation between state and civil society, his concept of politics, his analysis of totalitarianism, and his criticism of pre-modern Confucian political thought fundamentally challenge our common views on Confucian political philosophy.

There are a number of reasons for the silence that has long prevailed on Tang’s political thought. For one, his political ideas defy conventional assumptions about Confucian political thought and are thus unsettling for those seeking confirmation of hitherto unchallenged perceptions. This may also be said, incidentally, of Mou Zongsan’s political thought of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Tang’s and Mou’s depiction of the shortcomings of traditional Confucian political thought is one of the most insightful, if not searing, critique of Confucianism put forward in the 20th century.5

The reception of Tang’s political thought in Mainland China was limited up to the 1990s due to its strong anti-communist and anti-Marxist strains and the reference to Metzger’s A Cloud across the Pacific. One can only guess that this misinterpretation is due to the very limited scope of the analysis of Tang’s political writings by Angle and Metzger; see Angle Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy, p. 181. Other recent studies that make limited use of Tang’s political thought include Joseph Chan’s Confucian Perfectionism. A Political Philosophy for Modern Times. Chan sets his study in a broader framework of contemporary political theory and makes suggestions for establishing democratic institutions based on Confucian political ideas (such as a “Second Chamber” in parliament which should function as a meritocratic counter-weight). David Elstein’s thought-provoking Democracy in Contemporary Confucian Philosophy is yet another example of a highly selective overview in the field. In discussing the political thought of what he calls “overseas new Ruism,” the author exclusively singles out Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, and Lee Ming-huei. There is also no mention of Tang’s political ideas in Lee Seung-hwan’s A Topography of Confucian Discourse. Politico-Philosophical Reflections on Confucian Discourse since Modernity.

5 For a discussion of Mou Zongsan’s critique of pre-modern Confucian political thought: Fröhlich, “‘Confucian Democracy’ and its Confucian Critics: Mou Zongsan and Tang Junyi on the Limits of Confucianism,” pp. 177–183. An example of such eloquent silence is Cai Renhou. On the one hand, Cai draws attention to Mou Zongsan’s critique of Confucian political ideas for having failed to restrain arbitrary rule by emperors; on the other, Cai assumes that Mou favoured the “Confucian” idea of common welfare as embodied in the notion of “people as foundation” (min ben 民本). This conclusion is questionable, to say the least. After all, Mou wanted to examine why the foundations of constitutional government had not been conceptualized in Confucian traditions, which centered on the notion of the “people as foundation” (see Fröhlich, ibid.); Cai, Xin rujia yu xin shiji, pp. 45–46.
pronounced criticism of the CCP. In democratized Taiwan, interest in modern Confucian political thought was generally quite narrow, probably in part due to the insistence of Confucian intellectuals on a depiction of “China” as a unitary cultural nation. According to this conception, the Chinese cultural nation unfortunately exists for the time being in the political form of two nation-states on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This point of view obviously has little appeal to those who subscribe to the idea of a Taiwanese nation. In addition, even those Taiwanese and overseas proponents of a Chinese cultural nation who identified this notion with the Republic of China might not have been entirely at ease with Tang’s political thought because of his criticism of the GMD and its brand of cultural nationalism.

One further reason for this general silence is the excessive attention that has been given in recent years to a lengthy manifesto entitled *A Declaration to the World for Chinese Culture (Zhongguo wenhua yu shijie)*, compiled by Tang Junyi and signed by Mou Zongsan, Zhang Junmai, and Xu Fuguan. First published in 1958 in *The Democratic Review (Minzhu Pinglun)*, Tang produced the manifesto within two weeks during an extended visit to the United States in June 1957. He discussed its contents either personally or in correspondence with Mou, Zhang, and Xu. A partial translation into Japanese was published in 1959 in the journal *Ajia Zasshi* and a complete English translation was made available in 1960 in the Taiwan-based journal *Chinese Culture*. Two condensed translations followed later. Conveniently, the manifesto, together with its English translation, seems to provide a comprehensive overview of modern Confucianism. Nonetheless, the reception of this text is problematic, for it is often not read for what it is—a manifesto that makes an appeal to its readers—but rather as a carefully argued philosophical text. The latter tendency is no doubt partly due to its considerable length and its academic style. Yet, if the manifesto is read out of context, without reference to the many other texts written by the author in that era, it does not provide a reliable compass to

---

6 See Zhang, *Zhongguo wenhua yu shijie*. The manifesto was first published under the title “Wei Zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan—women dui Zhongguo xueshu yanjiu ji Zhongguo wenhua yu shijie wenhua qiantu zhi gongtong renshi 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言—我們對中國學術研究及中國文化與世界文化前途之共同認識” in: *Minzhu Pinglun*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1.1.1958), pp. 2–21. For the Japanese version, see *Ajia Zasshi* No. 25 (1959); for the full translation into English, see Chang (Zhang Junmai), “A Manifesto on the Reappraisal of Chinese Culture;” for partial translations into English, see Chang (Zhang Junmai), *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought*, Vol. 2, pp. 1–29; Kramers, “Confucian Apologetics in Modern Times.” It must be noted that none of these English texts is free of terminological inconsistencies.
Tang’s philosophy. A much broader analysis is therefore indispensable if one wants to avoid drawing inaccurate conclusions and missing important topics of Tang’s thought.

Discussions about the manifesto show, moreover, that the text has not undermined stereotypes of Confucianism that reduce the spectrum of Confucian political thought to such topics as the self-cultivation of political actors, rule by virtuous or meritorious persons, or the intimate relation between the spheres of the family and the state. Again, these stereotypes are prone to produce anachronisms by topical omission. One such anachronism is evident in the neglect of an issue which figured prominently in Tang’s thought: the nature and impact of totalitarianism on the contemporary world and its implications for constitutional democracies. Even though this issue is clearly linked to events and developments that dominated international political thought in the mid-20th century and was hence prevalent during a period in which projects of modern Confucianism evolved, the considerations of Tang Junyi, but also, for example, of Zhang Junmai or Xu Fuguan on totalitarianism have gone largely unnoticed to this day. This neglect has repercussions on recent research on “Confucian democracy.” The latter is generally still preoccupied by normativist attempts to link up pre-modern Chinese Confucianism with contemporary theories of democracy or general reflections about democratic societies. Against this backdrop, this study aims to show that a reconsideration of Tang Junyi’s political thought can shed light on a critical strain within modern Confucianism that has so far been largely ignored.

Like many contemporary intellectuals, Tang was aware of the fact that “Confucianism,” or the adjective “Confucian,” is often used as a vague denominator for a wide range of political ideas and practices that can serve to justify democratic, non-democratic, and even anti-democratic thought and institutions. Yet Tang was not content with merely brushing over the entanglement of Confucian ideas and practices with non-democratic forms of government, before and after the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. This common tendency is especially unsatisfying when a purportedly novel critique of Western-style democracies—and indeed even a superior concept of a future democracy—is presented in the name of Confucianism. It is not enough, therefore, to simply comb through classical Confucian texts in a highly selective manner in order to detect proto-democratic ideas. Equally unconvincing are arbitrary identifications of long-standing ideas, practices and institutions as ostensible “Confucian” achievements, no matter whether they pertain to the imperial civil service examinations, the political functions of imperial historiography, or the “meritocratic” rules for the promotion and demotion of government officials. The problem here is that many political ideas, practices and
institutions like these evolved over long periods of time, and often without any connection at all to the “classical” works of Confucianism. Apart from the tendency to overstate the impact of Confucian thought at the expense of other political traditions (e.g. Legalism and Mohism) or in less prestigious, but in fact highly influential writings (such as manuals for imperial officials, legal texts etc.), there is a risk of committing stereotypical anachronistic distortions.7

Even if we were to concede that one might actually discern core democratic ideas in pre-modern Confucianism, their applicability to the political discourses of the 20th century and beyond would still present a major challenge. Unless time-honored Confucian traditions prove effective not only with respect to critiquing the shortcomings of contemporary democracies, but also, and equally important, those of contemporary non-democratic or anti-democratic rule, they can only remain a dubious fellow-traveler of modern democratic thought. By the same token, it is not sufficient to simply espouse an intellectual “renewal” of Confucianism that contents itself with being able to explain the failure of Confucian traditions to establish democracy in China. If a reconstructed Confucianism is to function as an intellectual resource of democratic theory, it needs to prove that it can address fundamental challenges to democracy. These include, first and foremost, the totalitarian and authoritarian challenges that emerged in the 20th century.8 In as much as a renewal of Confucianism remains oblivious to such challenges, its critique (or affirmation) of extant democracies must remain aloof to historical reality. What is more, given that the discourse on Confucianism and democracy is a fairly recent phenomenon that was accompanied throughout the 20th century by competing non-democratic

7 The type of anachronisms at work here are of the kind that Quentin Skinner identified when he warned that “[a] given writer may be ‘discovered’ to have held a view, on the strength of some chance similarity of terminology, about an argument to which they cannot in principle have meant to contribute.” See Skinner, Visions of Politics. Volume 1. Regarding Method, p. 60 (“Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas”).

8 It is well known that the concept of totalitarianism is highly problematic and gave rise to prolonged controversies in academic circles as well as in public discussions, not the least because it seems to imply a conceptual, functional, or otherwise detectable equation of National Socialism and Stalinism. Comparisons pertaining to the nature and function of death camps, to the ontological status of “class struggle” as compared to “racial struggle,” to the organizational structure of the regimes, and to the “difference between a state that commits genocide and a genocidal state” are still controversial issues. In a review article from 2006, Anson Rabinbach sums up this state of research by noting that “… until recently, few systematic comparisons on the current state of historical research have actually been undertaken;” see Rabinbach, “Moments of Totalitarianism,” pp. 77–87 (for the above quotations, see ibid., pp. 77–78, 85).
“Confucian” claims (ranging from calls for a Confucian state religion to vindications of authoritarian rule in terms of Confucian values in Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea), it is even more important to grasp Confucianism’s non-democratic or even anti-democratic undercurrents. This does not necessarily imply that modern Confucianism is inevitably vulnerable to being absorbed by anti-democratic ideologies or that it even contained proto-totalitarian elements.\(^9\)

Just the same, it is regrettable that many contemporary advocates of Confucianism seem to take very little interest in analyzing anti-democratic currents in today’s world. To be sure, many of these advocates completely neglect the legacy of their predecessors, among them Tang Junyi, for whom the authoritarian and totalitarian challenges to democracy in the middle of the 20th century were of serious concern. His political philosophy may thus be considered “practical” in an emphatic sense. What is at stake here is the credibility of Confucianism with respect to liberal democracy. A critical interpretation of Tang’s response to totalitarianism, which has so far received only scant attention, is therefore all the more important (see Chap. 12).

As long as efforts toward Confucian revivals and reconstructions of Confucian humanism continue to neglect the darkest periods of the 20th century, they will continue to evoke uneasiness when it comes to the issue of the historical memory of post-war democracies. The fact that the Confucian revivals are currently flourishing on the Chinese Mainland, where the public memory of foreign and Chinese totalitarianism remains highly constricted by

---

\(^9\) Gan Yang suspects continuities between “traditional societies” and “socialist states” that become manifest in the persistence of totalitarianism and a (totalizing) moral idealism. He ascribes to Confucianism strong moral-ideal tendencies and calls upon modern Confucianism to finally learn its historical lesson; see Gan, “Ruxue yu xiandai—jian lun ruxue yu dangdai Zhongguo,” pp. 607, 613–614. Xu Fuguan raised a similar criticism about Tang Junyi’s and Mou Zongsan’s modern Confucianism in the early 1950s; see Lee, Xu Fuguan and New Confucianism in Taiwan (1949–1969): A Cultural History of the Exile Generation, pp. 186–188, 192–204. More recently, Thomas Metzger presupposes with respect to modern China that what he calls “the four ideologies” (i.e. modern Confucian humanism, Chinese Marxism, Chinese liberalism, Sunism) were characterized by an “epistemological optimism.” He then suggests that his thesis “…that the structure of authority in China is closely connected to a tradition-rooted, pervasive form of epistemological optimism contrasting with a much more pessimistic epistemology in Western liberal democracies meshes with Charles E. Lindblom’s view regarding the contrast between the epistemology of the latter societies and that of the U.S.S.R.” See Metzger, A Cloud across the Pacific. Essays on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theories Today, pp. 175, 182.
official ideological standards, only adds to this discomfort. The same might be said of the large-scale revival of Confucianism in post-war Taiwan. It began in the 1950s, again under conditions of an ideologically constrained memory culture, and intensified during the movement for the “Revival of Chinese Culture” from the mid-1960s onwards. For those who consider it crucial to maintain a historical awareness of the dangers of totalitarianism in contemporary democratic societies, it is indeed difficult to fully approve the current Confucian revival agendas.

Coherence and Comparison

Even though the present study does not conform to common approaches of comparative philosophy (for reasons that will be elucidated), it nonetheless entails elements of cross-cultural comparison. In order to adequately contextualize the discourses under examination, two aspects deserve special attention:

First, it is necessary to address key aspects of conceptual transfers in modern Confucian philosophical discourses. This is even more critical given that modern Confucianism has deliberately produced an extraordinary blending of philosophical terminologies and intellectual traditions. The philosophical language of modern Confucianism oscillates between modern and pre-modern European, American, Japanese and traditional Chinese philosophical vocabularies, creating a discursive space of extreme permeability across cultural regions and historical periods. The appropriations of philosophical concepts, whether they stemmed from indigenous or exogenous discourses, greatly contributed to the dynamic of modern Confucian thought. While the usage of familiar terms from Chinese sources might give the semblance of continuity, more often than not this was a matter of breaking up long-established conceptual conventions “from within.” There is, for example, the notion of *liang zhi*, which figures prominently in modern Confucianism. From a diachronic perspective, it is noteworthy that in pre-20th century Chinese thought, *liang zhi* was a key term in moral philosophy and metaphysical speculation (e.g. in the school of Wang Yangming). In the case of Tang Junyi’s appropriation of *liang zhi*, the earlier moral-metaphysical meanings were retained, however with a fundamental shift towards an ontotheological dimension that is not to be found in earlier Confucian thought (see Chap. 5). From a synchronic perspective, the term “philosophy of history” (*lishi zhexue 歷史哲學*) that Tang and Mou Zongsan applied in the early 1960s can be taken as exemplifying a certain semantic strategy (see Chap. 11). By presenting their historical
speculation under the Western category of *lishi zhexue*—a term that was not available to Chinese thought prior to the 20th century—they unmistakably underscored that the function of modern Confucian discourse was to break with traditional forms of Chinese historiography. At the same time, *lishi zhexue* served to undermine contemporary currents in Western historical thinking of the 20th century by referring back to a type of historical speculation that had flourished in the 18th and 19th century. In addition to this, the usage of the term *zhexue* (as in *lishi zhhexue*) served to put Western and Chinese “philosophy” on par with each other, hence functioning to leverage conventional Western, ethnocentric notions of philosophy in general and those European philosophies of history that excluded non-Western philosophical traditions in particular.

Second, the examination of modern Confucian discourses should obviously entail levels of social and intellectual contextualization, as well as an internal contextualization of ideas (in the broad sense) within an author’s oeuvre. “Levels” here relates, on the one hand, to the distinction between explicit textual references to certain historical or biographical constellations and, on the other, to references that the interpreter brings into play regarding given contexts. Take for instance Tang’s biographical account of his epiphany at age 26 in his *Life, Existence and the Horizons of the Mind* (*Shengming cunzai yu xinling jingjie*), or his mention of contemporary political events, such as the communist takeover on the Mainland. Beyond such explicit references, the interpreter might also find it conducive to consider, for example, the fact that Tang had briefly held a position within the GMD government, even though Tang does not elaborate on his collaboration with GMD right wing theoretician Chen Lifu. Certainly, such “external” contextualization on the part of the interpreter does not have to result in distorting claims about an objectified interpretation, but can help to explore Tang’s political background. As regards the level of internal contextualization of discourses, it is illuminating to compare, for instance, Tang’s conceptualization of a Confucian “main current” in the manifesto of 1958 to other writings from the same period.

The present study neither describes Tang’s personality from a psychological point of view, nor does it strive to detect his allegedly original, inner motivation in producing his works. It is indeed a different matter to discern, as will be done here, Tang’s intentions on the basis of his ascriptions of meaning, purpose, and function to particular discourses in which he participated. Of central importance here is the epistemic status that Tang ascribed to “philosophy” as a discipline, as a discourse, and as a way of life. In so doing, he referred to a particular taxonomy of knowledge which he derived from a civil-theological framework (see Chap. 5). Still, the question remains whether the assumption that Tang’s
modern Confucianism is characterized by a “civil-theological framework” runs the risk of contributing to a so-called “mythology of coherence.” Quentin Skinner identified the latter as a serious flaw in the Western history of ideas that occurs when intellectual historians see it as their “task to supply these texts [under scrutiny—TF] with the coherence they may appear to lack.” Along similar lines, Skinner notes that interpreters ascribe to “the thoughts of the major philosophers a coherence, and an air generally of a closed system, which they may never have attained or even aspired to attain.”

Skinner’s criticism of an excessive focus on coherence in historical interpretations is highly instructive, for it also pertains to misguided efforts to disclose the original motivation of a philosopher as a basis for an allegedly “true” interpretation. In its extreme form, this can involve the claim of privileged access to the philosopher’s hidden or latent intentions and self-understanding. From this vantage point, the interpreter assumes a position of analytical superiority, at times even vis-à-vis the philosopher him or herself. This is not to say of course that any attempt to retrace intentions is misguided per se. The writing of intellectual biographies, for example, may produce important psychological insights into the life and work of a philosopher. “Intention” in this case is rightfully understood as a psychologically informed concept in which the interpreter tries to empathize with the author in order to gain a better understanding of his or her subjective intentions. The present study of Tang Junyi’s thought, by contrast, is not an intellectual biography, and references to Tang’s biography are made with a more modest, hermeneutical purpose in mind. They either contribute to a general knowledge of Tang’s path of life, or shed light on certain aspects of the interpretation of his philosophical work on a secondary level. For example, Tang’s messianic zeal or his ambivalent judgments on the GMD may be further contextualized by references to biographical resources.

References to “intentions” in this study are, therefore, unburdened by the psychological task of a subjective analysis of the philosopher’s mind. They are rather understood, in line with Skinner, as intentions to act in the form of “illocutionary acts.” The latter are linguistic “entities with an essentially public character.” They can take the form of interventions into ongoing discursive contestations and comprise, for instance, the discussion of certain normative claims. Such interventions are to be examined against the backdrop of respective linguistic conventions, i.e. the “locutionary force,” including common conceptual distinctions, shared identifications of problems, shared

---

10 Skinner, Visions of Politics. Volume 1. Regarding Method, pp. 67–68.
11 Ibid., p. 97.
vocabulary, etc. The illocutionary force of these acts is evident from the changes in the philosopher's use of linguistic conventions.\(^{12}\) Even though this study does not strictly follow Skinner's approach, his conceptualization of “intentions” informs its analysis of Tang Junyi's re-appropriation of traditional Confucian terms and conceptual distinctions, together with Buddhist and Western intellectual traditions, to outline a civil theology in reaction to the failure of democracy in China.

The search for a closed system of thought is arguably even more likely to mislead interpreters of Tang Junyi's work than an examination of supposedly hidden intentions. The voluminous scope of Tang's complete works militates against gaining an overview of parts that seem to be systematically linked and those writings or passages that do not fit into a recognizable “system.” The identification of systemic coherence is made even more difficult by the fact that Tang was at times an impatient and digressive thinker. Apart from his more academic works such as the series *On the Sources of Chinese Philosophy (Zhongguo zhexue yuan lun)*, his philosophical writings are often marked by greatly curtailed arguments and conceptual inconsistency. In fact, an interpreter of Tang's work one would likely admit to being occasionally perplexed by his peculiar writing style and his readiness to make obscure allusions to a higher, non-discursive realm of spiritual existence at the cost of theoretical clarity. This lack of intellectual rigor is indeed challenging for anyone trying to follow his thought. These reservations aside, there is no doubt that Tang aimed for and managed to achieve a certain degree of philosophical coherence in his work. His monograph *Cultural Consciousness and Moral Reason* is a prime example of this. Still, one need not go so far as to suggest that Tang created a “closed system.” I will argue instead in the present study that his oeuvre reflects a coherent philosophical/civil-theological framework. This is not to say that all parts of his work can or should be integrated into this framework—the interpretation of Tang has to remain open to the possibility of non-coherence. The distinction between “closed system” and “framework” is admittedly heuristic. However, in response to Skinner's warning against falling victim to the mythology of coherence, one might add that not every effort to pinpoint comprehensive philosophical coherence when interpreting seemingly loosely connected thoughts inevitably leads to distortions. Ultimately, the act of interpretation demands transparency with regard to one's own projections of coherence. Undoubtedly, retracing a framework of coherence in Tang's writings puts the

\(^{12}\) Ibid., pp. 90–102, 91–127.
interpreter at the risk of at least appearing as if he were still trying to uncover Tang’s hidden and only true intentions. This study has no such pretense. It is therefore all the more important to show that the civil-theological framework of Tang’s modern Confucianism stands in contrast to the idea of a closed philosophical system that identifies conceptual thinking as the only “systematic” approach to truth. Indeed, Tang ascribed to philosophical discourse in general, and conceptual thinking in particular, merely an intermediate function with respect to the highest form of human cognition, i.e. the intuitive, non-reflective “innate knowing” (liang zhi) of the absolute (see Chap. 5). Significantly, Tang understood Confucian philosophy itself not as a unitary form of philosophy, but as a very comprehensive set of philosophies containing idealist, materialist, monist, pluralist, rationalist, or empiricist strands. Overall, his modern Confucianism is only in a very limited sense the result of a specialized academic investigation into Western or Eastern philosophical writings and schools. It can be very difficult, if not altogether futile, to try to disentangle the sometimes ambiguous, even contradictory reception of the Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. When looking back at his own intellectual development in the middle of the 1950s, Tang frankly admitted that, while having studied books written by “thinkers of almost all philosophical schools,” he had never conducted “specialized research” into any of these philosophical schools. He rather made “choices” according to what he deemed to be true or false. Tang’s thought indeed remains elusive if it is interpreted solely from the standpoint of certain philosophical schools or currents. The closest Tang ever came to offering a conventional exposition of philosophical ideas was in those books and articles that were explicitly dedicated to an academic-philosophical readership, most of all An Outline of Philosophy (Zhexue gailun), an introduction to Eastern and Western philosophy, and the six volumes of the On the Sources of Chinese Philosophy series (1966–1975), which dealt exclusively with Chinese philosophy. Trying to cope with Tang’s modern Confucianism by adhering to a strictly comparative approach can turn out to be disappointing, especially if one expects to learn a “method” of philosophizing from studying his work.

13 Tang, “The Reconstruction of Confucianism and the Modernization of Asia,” p. 363.
14 Tang, Renwen jingshen zhi chongjian, p. 571. This admission can be confirmed by Tang’s diaries, which shed light on his reading habits. As his detailed listings of his daily philosophical readings show, he rarely studied a particular philosophical work on two or more consecutive days. When he would continue his reading of a text, he usually did so after weeks, sometimes months—just as if he were again seeking further inspiration.
When analyzed from distinctly comparative perspectives in a narrow sense, Tang’s writings seem to present a rampant and, at times, confusing array of philosophical inspirations from other sources, defying a clearly demarcated philosophical reception. Yet, it would be a mistake to simply suppose that this is a case of misapprehension or an indication that Tang was an eclectic thinker in the negative sense. As mentioned above, his refusal to expound the modern Confucian project along fixed lines of conventional philosophical research, as well as the “unsystematic” mode of speculation result from the civil-theological taxonomy of “philosophy.” This does not mean that an informed discussion of Tang’s philosophy can afford to merely ignore his extensive philosophical readings. The present study rather aims to challenge the notion that modern Confucianism can be comprehended as the mere product of specific influences from Western or Chinese sources. Such a reception-based approach not only contradicts Tang’s own understanding of how to absorb Western and Chinese philosophy, but can also hardly avoid frustrating or even unsettling results (depending on one’s initial expectations). As I will discuss below, this holds also true for Tang’s own pursuit of Buddhist thought and German idealism.

Tang familiarized himself with Buddhism in an academic setting during his student days, when attending lectures by Yogācāra-inspired “Confucian” philosopher Xiong Shili.\(^\text{15}\) However, he admitted that he was unable to grasp Xiong’s famous *A New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness* (*Xin weishi lun* 新唯識論) from 1932, and he appears to have kept his distance from Xiong’s philosophy, deeming it “too lofty.” In the same vein, he rejected Yogācāra Buddhism as a sort of “solipsism.” It is, therefore, hardly surprising that he did not subscribe to the teachings of Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 (1871–1943), who taught at the “China Institute for Inner Learning” (*Zhina Neixue Xueyuan* 支那內學學院) where Tang’s father and Xiong Shili had studied Buddhism.\(^\text{16}\) Even after abandoning the simplistic equation of “philosophy” with modern “Western” philosophy around 1940, he still declined invitations from both

---

15 Tang first attended lectures by Xiong Shili when he was enrolled at Peking University from 1925 to 1927 and then again when he studied at Southeastern University in Nanjing after 1927; see Tang, *Nianpu*, pp. 16, 21.

16 See Tang, *Renwen jingshen zhi chongjian*, p. 568; Tang, *Shengming cunzai yu xinling jingjie*, Vol. 24, pp. 470–471, 480; Tang, *Nianpu*, p. 23. Even though Tang was not a disciple of Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili, one might still agree with Ruichang Wang who states: “A few Confucian adherents such as Tang Junyi (1909–1978), Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), and Xu Fuguan (1903–1982) fled overseas and managed to develop significantly the conservative line of thought represented by Confucian masters Xiong Shili (1885–1968) and Liang Shuming (1893–1988) . . .”; see Wang, "The Rise of Political Confucianism in Contemporary China," p. 34.
Ouyang Jingwu and Xiong Shili to continue his philosophical studies as their disciple. As the story goes, his suggestion that he would rather pursue broader interests in philosophy caused both Ouyang Jingwu and Xiong Shili to lose their temper.\footnote{17}

Notwithstanding Tang’s reservations about Ouyang Jingwu’s Yogācāra philosophy and Xiong Shili’s renewal of Confucian philosophy within a Yogācāra-framework, there is only insufficient evidence to support Lao Sze-kwang’s contention that Tang’s philosophy was actually based on Huayan Buddhism.\footnote{18} Lao concedes that Tang’s alleged grounding in Huayan Buddhism would have given rise to a fundamental tension in Tang’s thought. He recounts how he once personally asked Tang how one might reconcile the fact that Huayan thought did not presume the existence of a factual reality whereas Confucianism indeed allowed for such a presumption. As Lao recalls, Tang did not have an answer to this question. Lao suspects that Tang had not reached a final conclusion about whether or not Confucianism had to assume the existence of a factual reality.\footnote{19} To be sure, there is agreement in research that Tang, like Mou Zongsan, held Huayan thought in much higher esteem than Yogācāra. As Jason Clower observes, Tang relegated Yogācāra to the lowest position of Mahāyāna philosophy, treating it as “Huayan philosophy’s less perfect antecedent.”\footnote{20} As Clower suggests, both Tang and Mou Zongsan considered Yogācāra thought to be “a dialectical stage in a certain process of philosophical development.”\footnote{21} This assumption about a dialectical sequence is consistent with Tang’s depiction of the historical formation of Chinese humanism which also takes the form of a historical sequence. Here, Tang concluded that Buddhism in general had only partial access to the humanistic “main current.” Buddhism, in other words, was not to be taken as a framework for the reconstruction of China’s

\footnote{17}{Tang, *Nianpu*, pp. 41–42; see also: Li et al., “Tang Junyi qi fo gui ru zhi yuanyin chutan,” p. 21.}
\footnote{18}{Lao Siguang (Lao Sze-kwang), “Cong Tang Junyi Zhongguo zhexue de quxiang kan Zhongguo zhexue de weilai,” pp. 20–21.}
\footnote{19}{Ibid. Be that as it may, there is quite extensive research on Huayan-Buddhism in Tang’s *Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun—yuan dao pian*, which is one of his six volumes on Chinese philosophy.}
\footnote{20}{See Clower, “Chinese *Ressentiment* and Why New Confucians Stopped Caring about Yogācāra,” p. 378. Clower refers in this context to Tang’s *Zhongguo zhexue yuanlun—yuan dao pian* (p. 407). Li Yufang and Zhang Yunjiang assume, too, that Huayan was Tang’s favorite Buddhist school, not only in terms of academic research but also more generally; see Li et al., “Tang Junyi qi Fo gui ru zhi yuanyin chutan,” pp. 21–22.}
\footnote{21}{Clower, “Chinese *Ressentiment* and Why New Confucians Stopped Caring about Yogācāra,” p. 388.}
humanistic tradition. In this context, one even finds very negative assessments of Buddhism such as the assumption that, by the times of the neo-Confucian revival in the Song period, Buddhism had already turned into an individualistic religion that was unfit to integrate diverging social currents. These kinds of critical statements are not unusual in Tang's writings and are in accord with his depiction of the historical "forms of religious consciousness" in his book Cultural Consciousness and Moral Reason (Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing, pp. 494–506). Despite expressing great esteem for the Buddhist "religious consciousness," the book leaves no doubt that the (renewed) Confucian religiosity is at a higher level within the "main current." If Huayan thought was really the hidden foundation of Tang's philosophy, as Lao Sze-kwang suspects, it would be odd, to say the least, that Tang downgraded Buddhism, including Huayan, to a lower stage within the historical development of Chinese humanism and also never explained (as he did with respect to Confucianism) how the Huayan tradition would have to be reconstructed under modern conditions.

A similarly complex picture emerges from Tang's encounter with German idealism, which was equally ambiguous. During the 1950s and 1960s, Tang read widely in Western philosophy, paying special attention to German idealism and its British reception. There are indeed multi-layered affinities between the "study of mind and [human] nature" (xin xing zhi xue 心性之學) of the modern Confucian project and the thought of Hegel, Fichte and, to a lesser degree, Kant and Schelling. Yet, it is obvious that Tang was neither a Hegelian nor a follower of Fichte—although comparisons with ideas found in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, the Philosophy of Right and in Fichte's Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge are clearly helpful for interpreting certain sections of Tang's philosophy (e.g. the concepts of ethical life [Sittlichkeit] and the modern state, or the somewhat Hegelian arrangement of topics in Cultural Consciousness and Moral Reason). It is quite likely that the highly selective assimilation of German idealist philosophy was, to some degree, the result of Tang's interest in Anglo-American Neo-Hegelian philosophy as represented by

---

22 On this assessment, see Zhang Yunjiang's and Li Yufang's analysis of Tang's evaluation of Buddhism in his Zhongguo renwen jingshen zhi fazhan from 1957. Tang stated here that Buddhist thought is "trans-humanistic" (chao renwen de 超人文的) and thus departs from China's essentially humanistic tradition. By the time the "aesthetic spirit" blossomed in the Wei-Jin period, the "original religious spirit" of Buddhism had already been lost and during the period of the neo-Confucian revival Buddhism had become a mere "religion of individuals;" see Zhang et al., “Tang Junyi dui Zhongguo Fojiao sixiang de zhengti panshi,” pp. 111–112.
Thomas Hill Green, Francis Herbert Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, and Josiah Royce, all of whom were cited in Tang’s writings.

Frederic Wakeman Jr. examined traits of Anglo-American Neo-Hegelianism that seemed to reverberate in modern Chinese thought. He highlights, for instance, congruities between Bosanquet’s concept of an “omnipotential,” yet “empty” principle which becomes manifest in human life and mind, and Wang Yangming’s speculation about a “Heavenly principle” (tian li 天理) and liang zhi. According to Wakeman, the philosophy of Chinese “syncretists of the 1920s” (Zhang Junmai, Xiong Shili and others) came particularly close to English Hegelian thinkers in maintaining “that life expressed a cosmic moral conscience reflecting man’s free will.” In addition to Wakeman’s observations, one can further note the conformity between “the depiction of political society as an instrument of individual realization” in the thought of Tang Junyi and Thomas Hill Green. However, as will be shown, Wakeman’s conclusion that the Chinese “syncretists” tended to “blur the singular individual” in their speculation about the spiritual unification of man’s consciousness with the “soul of the world” does not apply to Tang’s philosophy.23 In his “absolute idealism” (juedui de weixin lun 絕對的唯心論), Tang clearly affirmed the importance of the individual effort for enabling the human being to “see” that the “world of phenomena” (or the “objective reality”) is in fact a “manifestation” of “the one mind of Heaven” (yi tian xin 一天心).24 It should be noted that Tang avoided the term lixiangzhuyi 理想主義 (which was commonly used to denote German idealism up to the 1950s25) when referring to his own brand of metaphysics. This is in line with his decision not to categorize Confucianism as

---

23 Wakeman, *History and Will. Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung’s Thought*, pp. 285 (on Wang Yangming and Bosanquet), 287 (on the Chinese syncretists), 293 (on Green).

24 In regard to the development of his metaphysical speculation, Tang once expressed his intention to move from absolute idealism to what he called “transcendent realism” (chao-yue shizai lun 超越實在論), or a “blending” of these two: Tang, *Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing*, p. 363.

25 Lixiangzhuyi was a common translation of “idealism” since the mid-1920s; see Shangwu Yinshuguan Bianshen Bu, *Zhexue cidian*, p. 634. In a long manuscript from the early 1950s, Tang used lixiangzhuyi in reference to German idealism: see his “The philosophical spirit of modern Western idealism (Xifang jindai lixiangzhuyi zhi zhexue jingshen 西方近代理想主義之哲學精神)” in: Tang, *Zhexue lunji*, pp. 601–751. But Tang’s terminology can be confusing, as he variously used lixiangzhuyi, weixin lun and guannian lun 観念論 to refer to Western “idealism;” see Tang, *Zhexue gailun*, Vol. 2, pp. 301–332.
most likely because it might give the false impression that modern Confucianism was merely a Chinese reinterpretation of German idealism.²⁶

Obviously, Tang did not reconstruct Confucian philosophy as if it were a branch of German idealism. This would have compelled him to react against the devastating criticism that philosophers like Hegel and Kant, but also Herder, leveled against what they perceived as Confucianism and a Confucian China. In his Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Hegel had relegated China (as part of the “Oriental world”) to a historiographical position that was still outside of the world history that Hegel’s philosophy of history claims to retrace.²⁷ Hegel’s demotion of China certainly did not encourage Chinese philosophers to adopt his philosophical speculation about history. Tang, though, simply disregarded Hegel’s judgment in this regard in his forays into idealist philosophy. What is more, as will be shown, Tang’s modern Confucianism also shares focal concerns, topics, and ideas with philosophical anthropology (e.g. Max Scheler’s)—a philosophical current that rejected significant parts of German idealism, including philosophies of history. The reason for the seemingly contradictory inclusion of elements from German idealism and philosophical anthropology must be sought in Tang’s extensive search for inspiration across the boundaries of philosophical “systems.”

Apart from Buddhism and German idealism other intellectual currents might be illuminating for comparative purposes, even if Tang did not actually study them. Especially promising is a comparative study of texts written by Tang and Nishida Kitaro 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) as well as other

²⁶ See e.g. Tang, Wenhua yishi yu daode lixing, p. 368. The term “weixin 唯心,” as in juedui weixin lun, indicates an interest in the philosophy of Wang Yangming and his followers. Yet, weixin here does not refer to Xiong Shili’s weixin philosophy, for Tang used weixin broadly, e.g. in references to Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, British, and American idealism; see also the use of weixin in the translation of “objective idealism” (keguan weixin lun 客觀唯心論): Zhexue gailun, Vol. 1, pp. 443–445, or in reference to the philosophy of Wang Yangming: Zhexue gailun, Vol. 2, p. 376.

²⁷ See Hegel’s statement about the lack of “subjectivity” in a historically immobile Chinese empire: “Early do we see China advancing to the condition in which it is found at this day; for as the contrast between objective existence and subjective freedom of movement in it, is still wanting, every change is excluded, and the fixedness of a character which recurs perpetually, takes the place of what we should call the truly historical. China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World’s History, as the mere presupposition of elements whose combination must be waited for to constitute their vital progress. The unity of substantiality and subjective freedom so entirely excludes the distinction and contrast of the two elements, that by this very fact, substance cannot arrive at reflection on itself—at subjectivity.” Hegel, The Philosophy of History, pp. 132–133.
philosophers of the Kyoto School—even though Tang did not explicitly refer to them and, indeed, may never have even read them. Nishida and Tang offer equally ambitious readings of Western philosophy, and especially of German idealism, and Buddhist thought, as both attempted to transcend, not only epistemologically, but also ontologically, dichotomies of subject and object, self and absolute, consciousness and reality. James Heisig’s observation about Nishida’s thought also applies to the work of Tang, namely, that the reader finds there the “crowning argument that all of reality can be grounded in a direct intuition, a ‘self-awareness’ in which the knower had transcended the subject-object world.” Equally consistent with Tang’s thoughts on intuition (liang zhi) is Nishida’s statement that “[w]hen we submerge ourselves into the depths of self-awareness in active intuition and take the standpoint of a self whose seeing has negated the seer, all things that exist are transformed into a self-awareness and a self-expression.” As regards moral philosophy, Tang and Nishida were therefore much more interested in fathoming “morality as a state of awareness” than in devising a virtue ethic or a deontological type of moral philosophy.

There are further striking similarities between Tang’s and Nishida’s thought with respect to the epistemological status of philosophical language. When reading Tang, one can readily identify parallels with Heisig’s contention “… that in his [Nishida’s] philosophical writings … allusions to self or true self are little more than metaphor for one’s inner nature that is one with the nature of reality itself, or for the ascent of the subject to an awareness where the ordinary self-centered subject gives way to a more profound principle of identity.”

Yet for all its proximity to the Kyoto School, modern Confucianism must be understood as an intellectual enterprise in its own right, and not only because it emphatically addressed Confucian thought. In both form and content, its attempt to relate the speculation about the transformative self-realization to a reflection on modernity that entails political thought and ethics as well as cultural and social philosophy is distinct from the Kyoto School.

The scope of large-scale comparisons could be extended until a kind of philosophical mosaic emerges. The heuristic surplus value of such an approach

28 In the following, I draw from James Heisig’s superb study Philosophers of Nothingness. An Essay on the Kyoto School.
29 Heisig, Philosophers of Nothingness. An Essay on the Kyoto School, p. 47.
30 Quote from: ibid., p. 59.
31 Ibid., p. 60.
32 Ibid., p. 52.
would continuously decline, however, and eventually become counterproduc-
tive by creating the false impression that Tang’s thought is occasionalistic in
nature. Such a conclusion would belie the fact that, due to its civil-theological
vantage point, his modern Confucian project was neither occasionalistic nor
relativistic at its core, but remained oriented toward an emphatic truth claim.
This orientation involved an awareness of the limits of discursive thinking
with regard to the ultimate, non-discursive “innate knowing” of the “Heavenly
principle” and consequently unburdened the discursive practice of philoso-
phy from clinging to an absolute truth claim. At the same time, it encouraged
the human being in his quest to attain self-fulfillment in the intuitive act of
“knowing Heaven.” Thus, in a manner of speaking, the inter-relations of lan-
duage, time, meaning and truth ultimately defies explanation on this point.
The implications are severe. However, to quote Adorno’s famous phrase, Tang’s
philosophy can be absolved from leaping into a mere “jargon of authenticity.”
Adorno took issue with Heidegger’s philosophy, in which he detected a jar-
gon which “obliterates the difference between this ‘more’ for which language
gropes, and the in-itself of this more.”33 In contrast, such a pretension is absent
from Tang’s thought, for the difference between the “‘more’ for which lan-
duage gropes, and the in-itself of this more” is the pivotal point upon which
his civil theology and its taxonomy of conceptual knowledge turns. Still, the
civil-theological link between reason and intuition is ultimately fragile and
it pushes Tang’s modern Confucianism to the brink of irrationalizing human
self-awareness and the individual’s orientation to the world.

33 Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. 12.