

Embedded Transcultural Thinking and New Confucianism: The Methodology of Political Theory in Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan

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Abstract

Recent debates in comparative political theory (CPT) are structured by a tension between the urgent need to bring in non-Western political thought to challenge the dominance of the Western canon and methodological difficulties in making sense of cross-cultural dialogue. While some theorists champion the idea of “genuine universalism” aimed at a normative congruence of diverse cultures and traditions, others are geared towards interpretive methods working on the complexities involved in each tradition through modern conceptual schemata. Some sceptics of the two approaches lean towards a more radical one, designating the local culture as the “particularised site for the circulation of knowledge” that treats the non-Western, subaltern locality as a subject capable of generating its own knowledge instead of as a static object of study. Diverse as the current approaches are, the lingua franca of CPT is still left fluid and amorphous. This is so because the very norms, concepts and frameworks widely shared are still, by and large, of Western provenance despite comparative theorists’ efforts to overcome them.

In this paper, I engage with New Confucian philosophers, Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan, and discuss the extent to which their political theories can contribute to the ongoing debate in CPT. Although their intellectual expertise spans the whole spectrum of philosophy, their political theories give us a unique insight into how politically motivated agents can meaningfully communicate across cultural boundaries without renouncing allegiance to indigenous identities. By engaging with Mou’s and Xu’s discussion of the complex relationship between Confucianism and democracy, I argue that they developed culturally embedded approaches to transcultural thinking that are attentive to both the relevance of Western typologies and the need to deploy them in ways that rejuvenate, rather than displace, the Confucian tradition. As such, my focus is not so much on the normative plausibility of their interpretations as on the methods to which they explicitly or tacitly subscribe.

Against the backdrop of a Confucian political crisis, the area of overwhelming concern for Mou and Xu was establishing what Mou calls a “New Outer Kingdom,” that is, finding a way to reconcile Confucian values with modern political institutions, an epitome of which is democracy. Relying on Hegelian and Kantian languages, Mou offered a Confucian justification of democracy by prying apart Confucian ethics and politics and by advocating the “self-restriction” of Confucian ethics. For Mou, democracy is valuable insofar as the objective structures of democracy provide conditions under which the subjectivity of Confucian ethics is rendered secure. Xu, in contrast, was more practically oriented and opted for a method less loaded with Western metaphysical concepts. For him, the primary value of democracy lies in addressing the problem of “dual subjectivities” in Confucianism. For Xu, the distinction within Confucian ethics between the practices

of attending to the self and others implies that the ruler should restrict himself and not impose on the people moral goods that they do not come by themselves. For both Mou and Xu, Confucianism as a living tradition also opens up the venue for addressing problems of apathy and conflicts displayed in the Western prototype of liberal democracy.

By addressing the questions of “why” (why democracy is valuable in light of Confucianism), “what” (what Confucian justifications of democracy are), and “how” (how Confucianism can contribute to democracy)—in other words, by casting democracy in Confucian terms, Mou and Xu managed to develop culturally sensitive approaches to transcultural thinking which are timely needed in CPT discussions. Neither of them pressed for cosmopolitan dialogue that purports to overcome extant cultural barriers; nor did they refrain from appropriating concepts of Western origin to bear on the projects of modernising Confucianism. The subtleties of Xu’s and Mou’s approaches are rendered explicit in the way they aspire to communicate in the modern political languages while firmly positioning themselves within the Confucian tradition. The differences between Mou and Xu in the points of reference and the concepts invoked also display the internal diversity of embedded thinking. Their methodological approaches are striking in that they stand in contrast to several strands in contemporary Confucian political theory that either purportedly hearken back to pre-modern Confucianism without due sensitivities to modern conceptual languages or cherry-pick Confucian ideas without dynamically making sense of the tradition itself. Mou’s and Xu’s approaches jointly demonstrate that meaningful cross-cultural engagement is possible if the bar is set not so high as to crowd out the outsider’s access to the mode of knowledge generated by non-Western traditions, and also not so low as to allow the indigenous ways of thinking to be obscured and suffocated by Western norms and concepts.