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INTRODUCTION:
DOING CHINESE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
WITHOUT “MAT VENDOR’S FALLACY”

Chinese philosophy, with perhaps the exception of Daoism, has a strong moral and political character. Ancient Chinese philosophers, including Confucians, Mohists, and Legalists, usually do not separate moral philosophy from political philosophy. They typically take political philosophy as an extension of moral philosophy and espouse political ideals from respective moral foundations. Mozi, for example, maintains that individuals should love one another and that the good society is one permeated with indiscriminate love. Legalist philosophy infers from the hopelessly selfish individual to an ordered society achievable only through reward and punishment. The *Greater Learning*, one of the Confucian classic “Four Books,” articulates the Confucian four-stage platform in terms of “cultivating the person,” “managing the family,” “ordering the state,” and “bringing peace to the world.” This Confucian philosophy begins with personal, moral refinement and expands to the family, which in the old days may be regarded a small community as extended families were the norm. It culminates in achieving the political goals of a harmonious society and a peaceful world.

The wisdom of this close connection of moral philosophy and political philosophy has been challenged in modern time. In particular, people have raised fundamental questions about the suitability of Confucian political philosophy in the contemporary age. The 1919 “May Fourth” movement challenged Confucianism in the areas of science and democracy. Critics of Confucian philosophy charged it as antiscience and antidemocracy. In an age with science and democracy as premium values, these charges are no less than the “death penalty” imposed on Confucianism. Ever since the “May Fourth” movement, Confucian philosophers have been looking for ways to meet such challenges. The issue between Confucianism and science settled fairly quickly after the so-called “debate between science and philosophy” (*Ke-Xuan Lunzhan*) in the 1920s. Confucianism now formally recog-

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nizes the legitimately independent role of science. Deciding how to meet the challenge of democracy has remained a continuing issue for Confucians throughout the twentieth century until present.

One main stream of thought among contemporary Confucian philosophers has been the reconciliation of Confucian political philosophy with the prevalent Western liberalism. Confucianism traditionally has put heavy weight on community (in the form of the family and kinship) and society. Its general tendency has been to define individual persons as members of the community who are to be cultivated in order to advance the common good of society. This thrust appears to move in a direction contrary to individual liberty. Of course, it is simply not true that there is no liberal thought in the Confucian tradition. One can quickly point to passages in the *Mencius* for example of early liberal thought, not to mention such free thinkers within the Confucian lineage such as Li Zhi and Huang Zongxi. The real question lies in how much individual liberty Confucianism can accommodate without jeopardizing its pro-family and pro-society core values.

To make it simplified, let us call these Confucian core values communitarian values. Though individual liberty can be used to promote communitarian values, there is an unmistakable tension between individual liberty on the one hand and these communitarian values on the other. In this sense, within the same value system such as Confucian philosophy, giving more weight to individual liberty implies giving relatively less weight to its communitarian core values. This means that increasing liberal values in Confucianism is not without costing its traditional core values. While some contemporary Confucian thinkers have been sensitive to the level of difficulty involved in this issue, many others have been simply oblivious of it. For them, it is a simple matter of crafting liberal values onto Confucianism. On the one hand, they want to preserve the core values of this tradition and stress its respective strengths. On the other hand, they also claim that Confucianism can be liberal enough to satisfy today's liberal demands. In doing so, they may have committed what I call the "the mat vendor's fallacy."

When I was a child living in a mountain village in northeastern China, I used to attend farmer's market with my grandfather. One day, we were looking for a bed mat. It was the kind of bed mats made of crop stalk skins, woven together diagonally into a rectangle shape. Because they were woven diagonally, the length and width of a mat were not firmly fixed. We found one vendor with mats of good quality, but then we found that his mats were not long enough for our need. In an attempt to sell us his mat, the vendor held one side of the mat and shook it: the mat became longer. When my grand-

father pointed out that now it did not have adequate width for us anymore, the vendor simply held the other side of the mat and shook it again: the mat became wider. I laughed at him because he appeared oblivious of the inescapable tension between making the mat longer and making it wider at the same time. Perhaps he was so eager to sell his mats that he did not realize that he could not have it both ways.

In dealing with the issue between Confucian philosophy and liberalism, we must be mindful of the tension between Confucian core values on the one hand and liberal values on the other. While Confucianism definitely contains its own share of liberal values, its core values are not liberal. Putting a lot of weight on the liberal side of Confucianism may please liberals, but it also carries a cost to its traditional core values. When people weigh heavily on the liberal elements in Confucianism and at the same time espouse the strength of its pro-family and pro-society core values, they are in some way like the mat vendor, who wants to have it both ways and have the strengths of both without giving in on either side. They stretch Confucianism toward a liberal configuration of values when they want to show the compatibility of Confucianism with democracy and liberalism. They stretch Confucianism toward a traditional, communitarian configuration of values when they want to highlight its communitarian strengths over liberalism.¹ That is simply fallacious. As we try to renew and reform Confucianism, we need to be aware of the cost each move involves and be realistic about any possible new form of Confucianism that can be generated. Only by proceeding this way can we steer away from superficiality, logical confusion, and self-deception.

In light of the above-discussed context, I now present to readers six articles in this special issue on Chinese political philosophy. I would like to take this opportunity to thank these authors for kindly and positively answering to my initial invitations and for graciously responding to my subsequent comments and requests for revisions. It has been a pleasure working with every one of them.

All their articles are either directly on or related to Confucian political philosophy. They are written with a clear understanding of the real issues in question.

Zhao Dunhua's essay addresses the issue of axiological rules and Chinese political philosophy. By "axiological rules" Zhao means four maxims of actions that have been commonly called the "golden," "silver," "brass," and "iron" rules. His analysis leads to the conclusion that schools of Chinese political philosophy, such as the Confucian, Mohist, and Legalist, have combined different axiological rules in their respective political philosophies. Zhao's essay provides a novel reading of these Chinese political philosophies and can help us to

better understand Confucian, Mohist, and Legalist political philosophy in comparative perspectives.

Joseph Chan considers a question, “Does Confucianism contain ideas or resources that may somehow *lead to an endorsement of democracy as a political system?*” He maintains that Confucianism does not contain any fundamental democratic values or principles, such as political equality or popular sovereignty, and that the most favored model of political institution in Confucianism is one of meritocracy and guardianship. However, he argues that, because this Confucian ideal may not be realistic today, Confucians would prefer democracy as a second-best option in the non-ideal situation because instrumentally it can better serve Confucian values and concerns than a monarchy without a virtuous, competent person in power.

Albert Chen’s essay deals with the important and urgent issue of Confucian political philosophy and liberal constitutional democracy. Chen reads the intent of the 1958 *Manifesto to the World on Behalf of Chinese Culture* by four prominent Confucian philosophers as embracing liberal constitutional democracy. Stressing the multifaceted nature of Confucianism, Chen argues for the need to figure out, through a balanced approach, what form of liberal constitutional democracy is appropriate for China, what elements and values need to coexist with one another, and what kind of creative transformation is desirable for the Chinese tradition. His analysis leads to the conclusion that, while a creatively transformed Confucianism can support liberal constitutional democracy as a political system, the precise form of such a system may not be the same as in other places of the world.

Yong Huang articulates a Neo-Confucian political philosophy based upon his study of the Neo-Confucians Cheng Brothers, whose political philosophy is contrary to the ideal of neutrality in contemporary Western liberalism. Arguing that the Confucian insight of governing people with virtue is still a valid approach, Huang concludes that the Confucian ideal of governing society by propriety (*li*), which includes both governing by virtue and governing by law, offers a viable alternative to liberal democratic politics.

Advanced to his earlier study of implications of Confucian political philosophy for contemporary China, Qianfan Zhang’s essay takes us to the political philosophy of Mohism. In Zhang’s view, while Mohism has built in certain checks against majoritarian abuses and tends to equalize social relationships by subjecting everyone equally to universal principles, it ultimately fails to provide a moral basis for autonomous human actions owing to the lack of metaphysical foundation for human virtue and dignity. He maintains that Mohism cannot substitute Confucianism for the purpose of developing a coherent conception of human dignity.

Finally and conclusively, Shu-hsien Liu presents a critical reflection on the democratic ideal and its practice. Liu painfully realizes that, whether in Taiwan, Singapore, and Mainland China, ideal democratic practice is still a faraway dream for his generation. He calls on Confucian intellectuals to keep constructing possible ways to implement democratic ideals and to remain vigilant in offering critical reflections on democratic practice.

Needless to say, of the vast numbers of studies in Chinese political philosophy, articles in this special issue may only represent a small fraction of views. But they are built on previous studies whereas they are further innovative in many ways. I hope readers will find them as refreshing and thought provoking as I have.

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ENDNOTE

1. For discussion of the notion of “configuration of values,” see my “The Confucian Ideal of Harmony,” *Philosophy East & West* 56, no. (2006): 583–603.