Conclusion

Whether one agrees with the tone of resignation expressed in the following passage or not, Volker H. Schmidt’s observations on the general difficulty of articulating a critique of modernity can stand as a succinct expression of the complex and ambiguous New Confucian stance towards the modern world which I have tried to describe and analyze in the present study. Schmidt argues that

[the trappings of modernity’s language games [...] force any critic to express their doubts and concerns in terms of standards that are themselves outgrowths of the modern, thus at once confirming what they are trying to put into question. This is inescapable. To go beyond these standards would require transcending the horizon of modernity’s imaginary, and that is beyond our current possibilities. So for the time being, any critique of modernity is bound to be an internal critique, a critique aiming to improve the modern condition rather than to abandon it entirely.]

Throughout this book, my goal has been to demonstrate that the writings of contemporary and “second generation” representatives of Confucian philosophy bear witness to these trappings in a variety of ways. There is no need for us to necessarily agree with either the diagnoses or the solutions they put forward in order to recognize that they are caught in the same game as we are and to grasp that the New Confucian turn towards tradition is hinged on the axis of modernization. It should be clear by now that their cultural “conservatism” is not to be explained away as a reactionary expression of nostalgia, but constitutes an ambitious attempt to redefine the relation between tradition on the one hand and what they take to be the socio-political as well as epistemological requirements of modern society on the other. These thinkers do no simply see the old as the insurmountable “Other” of the new, but rather as containing the potential for realizing as well as overcoming modernity and thus for coming to terms with some of the social and philosophical predicaments of the contemporary world. However, if tradition is to positively “realize” as well as enhance and enrich the modern instead of merely “adapting” itself as something externally imposed, it is obvious that the factual disappearance of Confucianism as an institutional reality has to be accounted for in one way or another. The solution has often consisted in placing this disappearance within a larger (trans)

historical trajectory, allowing it to take on a more positive function. Although the dialectical logic of “purification” and “self-negation” has performed and continues to perform this function quite effectively, at least on a rhetorical level, it cannot but reinforce doubts over the continuity and identity of tradition as something that apparently had to first die in order to be born again. The ghosts of Confucius and Marx continue to walk the mainland, but both seem to have irrevocably changed in the very process of being resuscitated, and it remains to be seen whether the two will ever proceed hand in hand.2 In any case, the widespread use of this logic, mimicking what Joseph Schumpeter called capitalism’s propensity for “creative destruction”, already betrays that in present circumstances, tradition can only be accessed and reinstated indirectly, within the horizon of modernity, as a former “source” of legitimacy that has been transformed into a “resource” (Zhang Qing) and can no longer dictate the terms under which it is to be invoked, interpreted, or used.

I have argued that both “spiritual” and “political” forms of Confucian thought attempt to accommodate the radical discontinuity resulting from the socio-political and cultural revolutions of the modern era through the paradigm of Spirit. In my analysis, I have attached considerable importance to the fact that this “politics of Spirit” was and continues to be employed in the context of a categorical opposition to historical materialism, communism and the rise to power of the CCP; the latter generally being read as the outcome of May Fourth iconoclasm and as a reinforcement of the reifying outlook of scientific materialism. In the case of the “spiritual” Confucians Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan, I believe to have shown that their confrontation with communism and Marxism is not an incidental and negligible feature of their work, but can help explain their turn towards the speculative heights of German Idealism as being enmeshed with their confrontation with modernity. By reading their attacks on Marx through a Postonian lens, I hope to have demonstrated that what they targeted in their internally conflicted critiques was not merely the specific pathologies of (Chinese) socialism, but some of the basic structural effects of the capitalist economy and modern society as such. As remains the case for contemporary Confucian thinkers and activists such as Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang, and Zhang Xianglong, in articulating a critique of the present, Tang and Mou reproduced some of the structural presuppositions of modernization

2 In a recent interview, Yu Yingshi admitted to avoiding using of the word Confucianism altogether in order to dissociate himself from the officially sanctioned and selective embrace by the CCP, that could very well, Yu fears, become a “kiss of death”. See “The Chinese Communists are not Confucianists”, China Change, July 2015, available online at http://china change.org/2015/07/01/the-chinese-communists-are-not-confucianists.