The question of the “legitimacy” of the concept of “Chinese philosophy” is now the subject of new thinking in mainland China. ¹ It is an old debate, which dates back to Japan’s and then China’s encounter with the modern West. It is clearly the case that this discussion is marked by an essential historical contingency, since foreign categories such as “religion” or “philosophy” were introduced into the language and thought of the Far East hardly more than a century ago, because of the exclusive hegemony of European culture. However it is equally clear that this discussion is endowed with a kind of relative necessity, since these categories were actively appropriated by the Japanese and Chinese elites, and used to re-think their cultural heritage. This debate has thus long since ceased to appear as an “East-West dialogue.” It is above all a discussion specific to China and Japan, a self-assessment through which the modern intellectuals of these countries periodically re-examine in critical fashion their own Western roots.²

Because of its historicity, this debate is rightly interminable. It does not await a dogmatic and definitive answer, but rather a kind of pragmatic decision. What is required, it seems to me, is a simple explicitation of the position one wishes to adopt, knowing that by definition it cannot be universally valid, since it depends on the kind of intellectual and philosophical commitment that one embraces. After that, it is time to move on to the main point; that is to say to work. It is not our aim here to approach this problem in general, but only to present

a few critical comments on one of the most remarkable attempts to champion a form of modern thought which is both simultaneously and equally “philosophical” and “Confucian,” that of “contemporary neo-Confucianism” as illustrated particularly by the philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909–1995). The comments which follow are meaningful only in relation to the radical demands of this movement. What is called “Confucianism” nowadays, points to a fragmented reality which, in a Chinese society which has become post-Confucian, can nevertheless be perceived, in a variable and always problematical way, in the misleading evidence of ideological practice or theoretical discourse, as well as in the more ambiguous domain of unexpressed values and lived behavior. There are now many ways to refer in an active way to this enormous inheritance. One can find there a source of personal or collective enrichment, without necessarily embarking on any philosophical detour. One can also, when such a detour is explicitly assumed, approach this inheritance from widely differing perspectives, ranging from theological anxiety to ethical preoccupation, as well as the effort of hermeneutic reconstruction. But it is a question here only of a particular current daotong, or “transmission of the way” and by the demand for a state of wisdom or of “sainthood” radicalized by the appropriation of Buddhist teachings. The difficulties which we will examine are worthy of the remarkable ambition and the theoretical power of this movement.

The propositions which follow take the deliberate risk of simplification. They seek precisely to be “debatable,” in making explicit the consequences of a possible positing of the problem which is capable by definition of not being exclusive. They need to be completed with more precise case studies.

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