

**Stephen C. Angle**

*Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism*  
(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 220 pp. ISBN 9780745661308 (pbk). Hardback/  
Paperback: £55.00/17.99.

Angle's exciting new book offers more than an overview of contemporary debates on Confucianism. By engaging both past and present global debates in Anglo-American philosophy, Chinese thought, and social and legal theory, the book develops its own muscular and unapologetically "progressive" version of Confucianism which takes on difficult questions raised by contemporary commitments to egalitarianism, democracy, and rule of law. It will therefore be of interest to any philosopher or social theorist interested in these ideas, particularly in how such ideas might be challenged or enriched by engagement with broader global traditions. This is especially true in that Angle—in contrast to many contemporary scholars who claim to offer a modernized version of Confucianism—sustains a truly rigorous and philosophical argument which does more than simply throw together ideas randomly cherry-picked from classical sources or contemporary debates. The book is therefore distinguished for both its scholarly rigor and for its engagement of Confucianism as it evolved across time and space.

Angle identifies two related goals for his book: one is to develop a "progressive" version of Confucianism, and the other is to make Confucianism applicable to a broader audience beyond China studies or comparative philosophy (p. 2). His first, introductory chapter offers a helpful typology of recent schools of Confucian revivalism, and explains how his own view of progressive Confucianism responds to these ongoing attempts to make Confucianism relevant in the modern world. Angle's reconstruction relies heavily on the ideas of Mou Zongsan, a once-neglected twentieth-century philosopher whose work integrating Western and Chinese philosophers, including Kant and Mencius, now stands at the center of debates about the possibility of modernizing Confucianism.

In Chapter 2, Angle critically explores Mou's notoriously complex concept of "self-negation," explaining how it helps to pry apart ethical and political values that traditional Confucians typically ran together. In accessible yet sophisticated language, Angle argues that self-negation provides grounds for a Confucian argument that politics "must be independent from morality, or else it, too, would be endlessly unfinished and inadequately protective" (p. 24). Chapter 3 further explores how particular kinds of institutions, such as constitutions and democratic procedures, might not only enhance, but be required by, Confucian moral principles if those are to be successfully embodied in

society. Angle's argument thus departs from many contemporary defenses of Confucian democracy, which claim to find advocacy of popular sovereignty in early texts such as the *Mencius* (p. 39). Rather than attempt a disingenuous "discovery" of such values, Angle opts to reconceptualize popular authority in ways that both reflect, yet critically reconstruct, certain Confucian commitments—such as to the neo-Confucian normative concept of *li* (coherence, an idea "based on the insight that the identity and role of anything depends on its relations to many other things and purposes," p. 48). *Li*, Angle argues, embodies a "capacious relationality" that will correspond to a broad inclusiveness of perspectives and so enable conceptualization of "the people" in a distinctively Confucian way, without at the same time replicating problematic traditional prejudices about the blind inferiority of the masses (p. 50).

In Chapter 4, Angle moves on to consider how rule of law arguments may be fruitfully combined with Confucian "rule by virtue." Drawing on the arguments of Zhang Shizhao, an early twentieth century intellectual who critiqued the limitations of Confucian rule by virtue, as well as Mou's own concerns that politics will be "swallowed" by morality, Angle argues that Confucians must be open to, even as their virtues should seek to moderate, the contestation accompanying the world of "politicians and lawyers" (p. 71). Chapter 5 considers a Confucian human rights regime grounded not in god-given natural rights but in Zhao Tingyang's normative concept of "all-under-Heaven." As Angle explains, following Zhao, "Viewing the world from the perspective of the world...requires us to arrive at the universal world perspective through an inclusive process, rather than universalizing a single perspective" (p. 89). As a result, such human rights may not come directly or solely from prior Confucian values.

In Chapter 6, Angle examines ritual, a concept which preoccupied imperial Confucians but which receives little discussion in contemporary philosophy. Angle's reworked concept of ritual enforces minimal demands of ethical cultivation, and remains open to critique from ethical perspectives outside of it. He shows that ritual is distinct from but compatible with rule of law, by non-coercively regulating proper behavior as opposed to evaluating motive or intent. Finally, in Chapter 7, Angle draws on recent literature in luck egalitarianism and oppression to advance an important critique of Confucian hierarchy. Recent Confucian apologists such as Daniel Bell have interpreted traditional Confucian social orders as justifications for "meritocratic" governance. Angle's discussion here is a rare and important attempt by a Confucian to take seriously the possibility that such an emphasis on meritocracy may justify structural inequalities and oppression, which not only privilege some at the expense of others but also may undermine possibilities for some in society to develop morally (p. 124).