

## **Lessons from the Past: Prospects for Confucianism in An Age of Globalization**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The revival of Confucianism in China is among the most unprecedented events in modern Chinese history. Given the antipathy toward Confucius in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rhetoric and the anti-Confucian policies in the early decades of PRC rule, it is reminiscent of a Chinese vision of Lazarus rising from the dead. The role of Confucianism in Chinese domestic affairs had long been a topic of conversation, dating from the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. Continued interest in Confucianism continued in Chinese diasporic and international communities outside mainland China who saw in Confucianism either continuity with their own local traditions or a historical artifact of a vibrant and vital pre-modern tradition, but one that had little or no contemporary relevance. While diasporic and international forces can be credited with keeping Confucianism alive (or at least on life support), the reversal of fortunes for Confucianism gained significant momentum with Xi Jinping's pro-Confucian rhetoric in recent years. As a result, discussions regarding the contemporary revival of Confucianism have emerged with renewed importance and relevance.

This paper explores some key questions for the contemporary Ruist agenda as it attempts to reformulate itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among these are basic questions about Ruism itself: What is it, what does it constitute, and what does it mean to be Ru? Are Ruism and Confucianism synonymous? Is there a category of non-Confucian Ru? If so, how should they be considered? Added to these questions of basic identity, there are other, 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns that impede upon a Ruist reformulation. These stem from modern societies formulated on vastly different principles and value structures than those of the East Asian past when Ruism thrived. How, for example, does a 21<sup>st</sup> century Ruism respond to concerns emanating from liberal democracies with their concerns for individual rights and protections, gender rights, equality, and so on? My paper explores dimensions of these challenges against the backdrop of the past, particularly in conversation with the Neo-Confucian reinvention of the tradition from the Song dynasty onwards. Central to this reinvention was a complex interrelationship with ideas emanating from Chinese Buddhism, borrowing extensively from it while charting new courses for revival—remaining true to its foundations while accommodating disparate and seemingly contradictory elements. This may serve as a model for Ruism to contemplate as it confronts 21<sup>st</sup> century realities.

### **Confucius in Tiananmen: The Return of the Native**

I leave to others, more knowledgeable than I, to review the vicissitudes of Confucian decline in the late Qing dynasty, the collapse of support for Confucianism in the Republican period, and the attempted obliteration of Confucian influence under the Maoist CCP regime. Let me begin with a couple of recent symbolic events charting Confucius return.

As was widely reported, the image of Confucius made an unexpected return to Tiananmen square in January 2011, outside the newly reopened National Museum of China and moved shortly thereafter to a courtyard inside the Museum. (pics omitted)

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the conference, "Rectifying the Name of Confucius," held at Boston University (Sept.,2018). I would like to thank the organizers of the conference, Bin Song and Lawrence Whitney of the Boston University Confucian Association, as well as the academic advisor, Robert C. Neville, and in particular for Bin Song's written comments on my draft, as well as comments and encouragements on my presentation by Bryan Van Norden and Stephen Angle. I have also benefitted from Shan Chun's careful reading of an initial draft and suggestions for improvement.

The second event occurred in September, 2014, when Xi Jinping delivered a surprise (at least to the participants) keynote speech at the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Confucian Association in the Great Hall of the People.

These events suggest that Confucius and Confucianism have infiltrated the upper echelons of CCP leadership, but for all their symbolic values, what are the real prospects for a Confucian revival in China? While Daniel Bell speaks of the positive need for Confucianism, of a “need for ethics and morals and promoting social responsibility” in an atmosphere of “increased individualism and increased sense of competition and anxiety” brought on by modern economic development,<sup>1</sup> Sam Crane, who teaches contemporary Chinese politics and ancient Chinese philosophy at Williams College, responded to Bell:

.... I see in his comment a certain irony: it is precisely when China has grown the farthest from its Confucian past, with the rise of culturally individualizing materialist competition, that some people there seek to reconnect with the tradition. In other words, China is not now a Confucian society and the Confucian revival there will not fundamentally redirect Chinese modernization. Whatever “Confucianism” arises there in the next few years and decades will likely be a shallow imitation of the original because the ethical demands of Confucius are too restrictive to modern lifestyles and behavior. While it may be true that certain individuals will find the commitment and fortitude to enact duty according to ritual and progress toward humanity in a manner consistent with Confucius’s thought, not enough individuals will do so to justify defining China as a “Confucian” society. The tension between Confucian morality and modern life is just too great.<sup>2</sup>

So, this leads us, again, to the question: what is the prospect for Confucianism, or Ruism, for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Rather than take sides in this debate, I would like to add some historical contextualization to the discussion. Confucianism has invented/reinvented itself previously, and what do these models suggest about the prospects and possibilities for Confucianism at present? Most of my discussion points will derive from my knowledge of the Confucian revival in the Song dynasty, particularly drawing from the early decades of the dynasty when the intellectual climate was fluid, when the Confucian revival, as part of the larger *wen* cultural revival of the period, was still in its infancy and seeking its directions.

### What is Ruism? What does it mean to be Ru?

The early Song dynasty is commonly acknowledged as one of the great turning points of Chinese, if not world history. In the 1930’s, Naitō Konan 内藤湖南, Japanese historian and Sinologist, founder of the Kyoto School of historiography, famously labeled the Tang-Song transition as an important watershed from “medieval” (*chūsei* 中世) to “early modern” (*kinsei* 近世) periods. Regardless of the veracity of Naitō’s specific formulation, there is broad consensus that the Tang-Song transition marks a watershed in Chinese history and culture that set a new template for what would follow. Buried within the seamless template of this historical transition was a furtive debate over the nature of China’s culture—what constituted it, how it should be defined, and what should be included. The early Song rulers, Taizu (r. 960-976), Taizong (r. 976-997), and Zhenzong (r. 997-1022) succeeded where predecessors had failed in turning the page on the century old (perhaps even two centuries, dating from the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山, ca. 755) period of chaos that preceded them, advocating a culture of *wen* 文, or literary culture, as opposed to *wu* 武, martial prowess. This turning point heralded a revival of interest in China’s past, initially coalescing in a movement known as *Song xue* 宋學, or “Song Learning,” a broad based exploration of antiquity and the more recent past in the hopes of reconstituting lost *wen* resources. This earlier phase was eventually supplanted by a need to define *wen* more systematically and comprehensively and in the process, invoked concerns that had persisted in literary circles since Han Yu’s 韓愈 famous diatribe against Buddhist influences on Chinese culture in the late Tang. The retrospective view of the Song dynasty as the “age of Confucianism,” exhibited in works like

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times* quote, January 12, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> [http://uselesstree.typepad.com/useless\\_tree/2011/01/confucius-in-beijing.html](http://uselesstree.typepad.com/useless_tree/2011/01/confucius-in-beijing.html)

the *Song shi* 宋史,<sup>1</sup> is but a teleological tribute culminating in Zhu Xi 朱熹 formulated by a nascent Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. The reality was much more complex and the debates of the early Song period may be likened to a second “hundred schools of thought.” In an earlier work, I attempted to characterize the dynamics of debate over *wen* in the early decades of the Song period with the following table, which reduces representative perspectives to six groups.<sup>2</sup>

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Intolerant <i>Guwen</i> 不妥協古文	Tolerant <i>Guwen</i> 寬容古文	Ru Buddhists 儒僧	Doctrinal Buddhists 教理僧	Chan Literati 禪文人	Linji Chan 臨濟禪
(Han Yu)/ 韓愈 Liu Kai/ 柳開	Wang Yucheng/ 王禹偁 Xu Xuan/ 徐鉉	Zanning/ 贊寧 Zhiyuan/ 智圓	Yanshou/ 延壽 Shengchang/ 省常 Zhili/ 知禮	Yang Yi/ 楊億 Li Zunxu/ 李遵勗	(Yixuan)/ 義玄 Xingnian/ 省念

Space does not allow me to discuss this table in detail, but to note the existence of multiple types of Ru: advocates of harder and softer interpretations of *guwen* 古文, Ru Buddhists who advocated Confucianism and were admired for their skill in literary (*wen*) arts, and both secular and Buddhist literati exponents of Linji Chan 臨濟禪, as well as traditional doctrinal Buddhist literati. The spectrum suggests that definitions of *wen* were fluid and that the Ru who espoused them represented a broad range of perspectives.

As is well-known, this tolerance for differing perspectives did not last. While the Song remained more fluid than Confucian retellings would have us believe, the *guwen* perspective eventually came to cohere around an exclusive commitment to Confucian sources and the moral principles espoused in them. Buddhism and Daoism were officially sidelined and would struggle to retain minority status in succeeding dynasties, left to the whims of emperors and secular elites. Yet, the narrative of Neo-Confucian ascendancy is only partially accounted for in this retelling. Even a glancing comparison between Classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism reveals the tremendous disjuncture and indebtedness to Buddhism and Daoism. To put it briefly, Buddhism supplied the questions, to which Confucianism, aided by Daoist metaphysics,<sup>3</sup> provided answers. The Buddhist agenda is apparent, for example, in the Neo-Confucian preoccupation with such things as mind (*xin* 心), nature (*xing* 性), and principle (*li* 理). The Neo-Confucian form of meditation, *jingzuo* 靜坐, or “quiet-sitting,” as a technique for spiritual cultivation is but a Confucian repurposing of Buddhist *zuochan* 坐禪, “sitting meditation.” The entire Neo-Confucian metaphysics and psychology may be seen as a calculated response to Buddhism, aided by Daoist metaphysics. Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤(1017–1073), the pioneer of neo-Confucianism, used Daoist metaphysics as a framework for his ethical philosophy, which was instrumental in providing a Neo-Confucian alternative to Buddhism. Neo-Confucianism thus provided both a revival of classical Confucian ethical and moral principles, updated to align with the social values of the Song dynasty, and a reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy and

<sup>1</sup> See the opening remarks in the Biographies of Literary Figure 文苑傳 1, in Exemplary Biographies 列傳 198 of the *Song shi* 宋史, which validates the path of Song literature in terms of *guwen* 古文.

<sup>2</sup> Welter, *Yongming Yanshou's Conception of Chan in the Zongjinglu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤(1017–1073), the pioneer of neo-Confucianism, used Daoist metaphysics as a framework for his ethical philosophy, which was instrumental in providing a Neo-Confucian alternative to Buddhism. Neo-Confucianism was thus both a revival of classical Confucianism updated to align with the social values of the Song dynasty and a reaction to the challenges of Buddhist and Daoist philosophy and religion. Although the Neo-Confucianists denounced Buddhist metaphysics, it borrowed Daoist and Buddhist terminology and concepts to formulate its alternative model.

religion. Although the Neo-Confucianists denounced Buddhist metaphysics, it borrowed Buddhist terminology and concepts and relied on Daoist metaphysics to formulate its alternative model. Whatever sources existed in the earlier Confucian tradition were recast on a cosmological scale in light of Buddhist theories, buttressed by introspective insights derived through prolonged meditations. In addition, the very basis for the study of Confucianism was reformed in conjunction with evolving Buddhist preferences. The Neo-Confucian transition from the Five Classics 五經 to the Four Books 四書 parallels the Buddhist shift from classical scriptural sources, the *sūtras* and their commentaries to *yulu* 語錄, or Dialogue Records, of contemporary Chan masters.<sup>1</sup> The preference for a direct communicative style, pithy and to the point, over tedious commentary, fueled an exegetical revolution that cut across ideological preferences. Finally, I'm reminded of how Zhu Xi's invectives against the lack of moral grounding in Buddhism mimics the late Tang Buddhist Zongmi's 宗密 argument for a morally grounded Buddhism versus the iconoclastic and ethically suspect antics of the Hongzhou Chanschool 洪州禪宗.<sup>2</sup>

My point is not to brand Neo-Confucianism as imitative and unoriginal, but to the contrary, to suggest that its success was predicated on the creative responses it made to the challenges presented by the new Buddhist agendas. Neo-Confucian success may ultimately be attributed to an ability to adapt core Confucian orientations and moral principles to unforeseen, unimagined agendas. This is the lesson from the past that the Confucian legacy bears as Confucians confront the current situation and attempt to redeem their tradition in a third, modern iteration.

### Ruism vs. the “Complex of Modernity”

The “complex of modernity” is a major paradigm in the social sciences stemming from the rise of the West and its global impact. As Steven Seidman comments, “Modern social theory crystallized as an effort to explain but also justify or shape the emerging cultural complex of modernity.”<sup>3</sup> This cultural complex has many far-reaching tentacles, too numerous to attempt to enumerate here, but forms the root system of our modern world. As framed by Stefano Varese, “Contemporary science and knowledge (thus theory of knowledge and epistemology) are integral parts of the socio-ideological complex of modernity-colonialism-capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> Among the tentacles that support the “complex of modernity,” the one I would like to focus on here, is morality. Niccolò Machiavelli is widely credited with the turn away from “conventional moral and religious standards of human conduct,” toward “a vision of political rule purged of extraneous moralizing influences.”<sup>5</sup> This turns away from moral behavior as the template for proper conduct is an aspect of the cultural complex of modernity that a revived Ruism must confront.

Along with the modern turn away from moral behavior as a fundamental basis for evaluating human character, the authorization of the individual as active agent and source of authority is another aspect of the cultural complex of modernity that poses problems for Ruists. While it is relatively easy for modern Ruists to fault individualism for its excesses and the democratic rights and privileges that accompany it, how might Ruists position themselves to confront the hegemonic behemoth, the cultural complex of modernity itself? Take, for example, a comment by Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, the well-known proponent of “Asian values,” that Asians have “little doubt that a society with communitarian values where the interests of society take precedence over that of the

<sup>1</sup> Daniel K. Gardner, “Modes of Thinking and Modes of Discourse in the Sung: Some Thoughts on the Yü-lu (“Recorded Conversations”) Texts” (*Journal of Asian Studies* 50-3 (1991): 574-603.

<sup>2</sup> Buddhist contexts of Neo-Confucian thought are explored in John Makeham, ed., *The Buddhist Roots of Zhu Xi's Philosophical Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2018). While Song dynasty intellectual history had long been characterized in terms of the narrative of the rise of Neo-Confucianism, the Japanese scholar Araki Kengo 荒木見悟 suggested many years ago how Buddhism, particularly Linji Chan, played an instrumental part in the Song/Ming intellectual milieu (*Bukkyō to Jukyō: ChūgokuShisō wo keiseisuru mono* 仏教と儒教: 中国思想を形成するもの [Buddhism and Confucianism: the Formation of Chinese Thought], Kyoto: Heiraku ji, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> “Modernity and the Problem of Meaning: The Durkheimian Tradition.” *Sociological Analysis* 46, no. 2 (1985): 109-30. doi:10.2307/3711055.

<sup>4</sup> “Indigenous Epistemologies in the Age of Globalization,” in Juan Poblete, ed., *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Cary Nederman, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2104); <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/machiavelli/>

individual suits them better than the individualism of America.”<sup>1</sup> Even as Chinese officials protest the hegemony of human rights,<sup>2</sup> a cogent program to replace such fundamental mechanisms that have girded the international order will need to be conceived that will persuade others to participate in and support.

### A Prospectus of Ruist Models and Agendas for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The emergence of China as a major force in international affairs, both economically and politically, poses serious challenges to the hegemony of Western liberal democratic values, including the human rights regime implemented through the United Nations and other international bodies following the Second World War. This is the leading intellectual issue of the twenty-first century, and will have significant implications for such diverse areas as diplomatic relations, international aid policies, domestic and international law, etc. In short, it offers the very real potential for an alternative hegemonic regime based on non-Western liberal democratic values, the most significant departure in international affairs since the fall of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War.

The lessons from the past suggest that there are many ways to define Ru and that the construction of Ruism, itself, is rooted in a particular historical consciousness. One of the fundamental questions is how inclusive Ru should be? Is Ruism a synonym for Confucianism, and if so, what kind of Confucianism should Ruism embrace? My brief excursus into the Song dynasty suggests that the core curriculum for Ruism is rooted in Confucian texts, but even here, we must ask ourselves which ones? Confucian study today presumes the authority of the Four Books, the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, *Great Learning* 大學, and *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, without pausing to reflect on the fact that this approach is the reconstructed agenda of Neo-Confucianism, that Classical Confucianism was predicated on a study of the Five Classics, *Shujing* 書經, *Shijing* 詩經, *Liji* 禮記, *Yijing* 易經, and *Chunqiu* 春秋. Regardless of which core is arrived at, the more important question is what kinds of materials will be allowed to augment it? Traditional fundamentalists were intolerant and excluded all but the core. Not only were texts from other schools of thought, but even Confucian guided writings like the dynastic histories were excluded. With the Confucian sense of hierarchy, a graded system of inclusion, with Confucian classics at the center and others at the periphery on a graduated scale, would be possible. This, too, would allow for an expansive definition of Ru to include literary types of various persuasions to participate and support. In the modern context it would allow for expanding the network of sources far beyond the Confucian and East Asian world to include world classics of non-Chinese vintage.

While important, mechanical questions around who and what are included do not address the central ideological issues that need to be confronted, namely morality and democratic-based individualism. The radical fundamentalist would eschew the modernist agenda and advocate for a return to morality and communitarian values (Confucian based). Here, I agree with Sam Crane that “While it may be true that certain individuals will find the commitment and fortitude to enact duty according to ritual and progress toward humanity in a manner consistent with Confucius’s thought, not enough individuals will do so to justify defining China as a “Confucian” society. The tension between Confucian morality and modern life is just too great.” And if the burden of reviving Confucianism is too much for ordinary Chinese to endure, how attractive will it be for

<sup>1</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 9-10 November 1991; cited in Daniel Bell entry on “Communitarianism” in the *Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (revised edition, 2009), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/index.html#note-5>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the explanation of the Chinese position given by Liu Huaqiu 刘华秋, former vice minister of Foreign Affairs, in his remarks to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (June, 1993): The concept of human rights is a product of historical development. It is closely associated with specific social, political, and economic conditions and the specific history, culture, and values of a particular country. Different historical development stages have different human rights requirements. Countries at different development stages or with different historical traditions and cultural backgrounds also have different understanding and practice of human rights. Thus, one should not and cannot think of the human rights standard and model of certain countries as the only proper ones and demand all countries to comply with them. (Vienna Conference Statement, 1993; cited in Stephen Angle, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. 1)

non-Chinese? And, as Crane has suggested, Xi Jinping's turn to Confucianism is somewhat disingenuous, a ploy by an authoritarian regime to harness the excesses of corruption that threaten the legitimacy of the ruling party.<sup>1</sup>In one sense, Xi may be likened to a lot of his imperial predecessors who hide behind Confucianism to legitimize a Legalist authoritarian regime. While Xi's use of Confucianism is rooted in a particular milieu, it points to a larger question. In a modern context, can Confucianism escape being merely a tool in the service of others (in spite of the famous refrain in *Analects* II:12 that "a Junzi is not a tool")? Within the broader "complex of modernity" discourse, is Confucianism simply a communitarian card to be played to highlight the excesses of an entrenched individualism, or as it is used by Xi, to reinvigorate a moral consciousness among a corrupt leadership? If so, challenges to prevailing systems are minimal, without substantial impact.

As Ru contemplate a future for Ruism, one may recall some of the lessons gained from the Neo-Confucian experience. Neo-Confucians remained true to a core set of moral principles and guidelines, while at the same time adapting and adopting new perspectives, concepts, and methods. It was the ability to adapt and adopt that proved successful. Not only was the new Confucianism a revival of old values, but also an acquiring of new ones. The combination served as an alternative that attracted broad support. This, it seems, points to the possibility of a successful strategy moving forward. It is important to remember, as well, that the Neo-Confucian agenda was the result of a long process involving a shedding of an old skin and acquiring a new one, requiring the energy of many creative minds over hundreds of years. Still, at this writing, it is doubtful that people raised on the modern experience of relative freedom will be eager to embrace moral strictures that limit individual expression. This will seem to many a return to an unenviable past, where moral choices were limited by a kind of priesthood, either religious or secular, rather than a way forward.

### From Ruism to Neo-Confucianism to New-Confucianism

The path I have charted here is one of paradigmatic shifts in Confucian orientations. As outlined above, Confucian orientations went through massive reorientations and reconfigurations from its original formulation as Ruism 儒教 in the pre-Qin Dynasty, focusing on the quest to nourish human benevolence (*ren* 仁) through ritual protocols (*li* 禮), to create a harmonious society based on moral virtue, to its reformulation as Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties 宋明理學, integrating Buddhism and Daoism in its metaphysical, psychological, and epistemological revolution. The various strands that contributed to this momentous cultural transformation are massive and complex, but the records of the past that illuminate it are subject to continuous scholarly research. The model of keeping old bones intact while adopting a new skin serves as an apt metaphor for how the modern Confucian revival, New-Confucianism 新儒家, might prosper in an age of globalization by embracing the political and ethical values of human rights, democracy, and republican form of government in a paradigm of creative transformation. The age of globalization suggests, among other things, that Confucianism no longer be parochial, reflecting the values of a particular region or country, but international, offering an attractive and viable model to the entire global community. Moving forward, New Confucian thinking must compete in the international marketplace of ideas and actively engage its readers to adopt an agenda that remedies the perceived failings of the "complex of modernity." To be fair, many New Confucians have been engaged in this process for some time—ever since the demise of Neo-Confucian ideology became apparent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—and are in some sense already immersed in the crucible of resilient reinvention out of which a new paradigm might come. The "lesson from the past" stemming from the Ruism to Neo-Confucian transformation suggests that Confucians must be receptive to creative, even radical reenvisioning of its perspectives. One of the impediments in current thinking, in my view, is the Confucian fundamentalist agenda that

<sup>1</sup> See Sam Crane, "Why Xi Jinping's China is Legalist, Not Confucian" <https://chinachannel.org/2018/06/29/legalism/>; and Ryan Mitchell, "Is 'China's Machiavelli' Now Its Most Important Political Philosopher?" <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/is-chinas-machiavelli-now-its-most-important-political-philosopher/>

dominates modern Confucian discourse. The *Analects* 論語 and the *Mencius* 孟子 have exerted an overwhelming influence over Confucian thought. As important as these texts are, it is unsuitable to reduce the tradition to them. The richness of Neo-Confucian thinking, while inspired by the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, expands far beyond the contours of the Ruism formulated in pre-Qin China to embrace a new cosmological vision, rich in metaphysical theories and psychological insights (the “new skin”). The successful coupling of these to the original Confucian social and ethical model (the “old bones”) became the basis for the new paradigm. Rather than retreat to the past, New Confucians are advised to follow *not* the maxim of Confucius in the *Analects*, “I transmit but do not innovate. I am faithful to and fond of the past” 「述而不作，信而好古。」, but to heed the advice in the *Book of Rites* 禮記, “The innovators are regarded as sages; the transmitters as [merely] intelligent” 「作者之謂聖，述者之謂明。」. Innovation is frequently a prolonged process involving trial and error, and we must remember that Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucian consensus was only formulated after hundreds of years of experimentations, in the late Song Dynasty, and did not take on the role of orthodoxy until the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Current New Confucianism is at a critical juncture. To thrive in an age of globalization, beyond the ministrations of the dedicated few, Confucianism will need to find more creative avenues and more innovative perspectives to provide a relevant model for the future. It will need to provide answers to confront challenging issues stemming from our current “complex of modernity” rooted in science, social science and psychology, moral issues relating to bioethical innovations, ecological crises, and so on.

What are the prospects for New Confucianism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As of this writing, I suggest that the prospects are not good. While New Confucianism has captured the imagination of a number of scholars from the Chinese mainland, Chinese diaspora communities, East Asian Confucian proponents, and Confucian admirers in the West (including Australia), any excitement over the transformative possibilities imagined by these groups seems highly restricted at this point, with limited influence beyond their own circles. Even in mainland China, where Xi Jinping has signaled a renewed interest in Confucian values as compatible with those of the Chinese Communist Party, the approach seems little more than a utilitarian accommodation of Confucian morality by the Party in an attempt to curb rampant corruption. There seems little prospect that the CCP will adopt Confucian principles in any substantive way beyond these utilitarian gestures.

New Confucianism may provide some limited contributions in the field of ethics and morality, but even here, it has to compete in the modern “supermarket of ideas” where previously isolated or semi-isolated religions and thought systems are forced to vie for recognition and influence. Outside of China and East Asia, where Confucianism is relatively unknown and there are few, if any, cultural touchstones to rely on, it has struggled to gain even a modicum of interest beyond the dedicated few. Contemporary New Confucianism has none of the universal appeal of Buddhism which, even though its broader appeal in the West is often highly inflated, has at least garnered wide recognition (for example, university courses on Buddhism in the West, generally speaking, tend to be extremely popular; by contrast, courses dedicated to Confucianism are seldom offered, with meager enrolments in comparison). Based on these limited observations, New Confucianism has a long way to go to find even a modicum of influence.