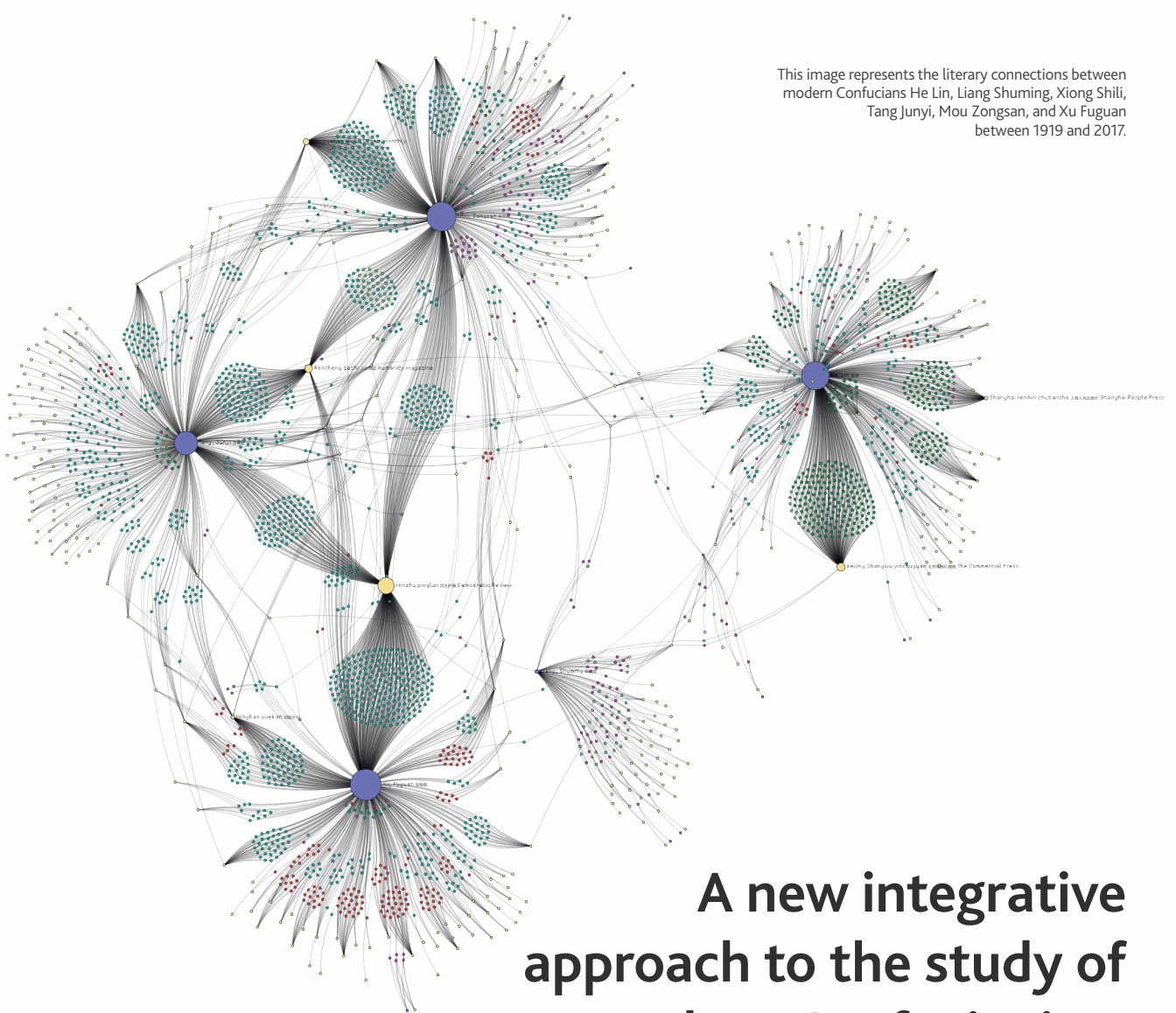


This image represents the literary connections between modern Confucians He Lin, Liang Shuming, Xiong Shili, Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, and Xu Fuguan between 1919 and 2017.



A new integrative approach to the study of modern Confucianism

- ★ Confucianism is an important Chinese tradition from which many philosophers have drawn inspiration, right up to the present day. We spoke to **Dr Philippe Major** and **Professor Ralph Weber** about their work investigating modern Confucianism, and its importance to understanding contemporary China.

Confucianism has a history of over 2000 years. Over the last two millennia, many thinkers have drawn from this complex tradition, right up to the present day. In the early 20th century the modern Confucian movement developed, pushing for a revival of the tradition, a topic central to Dr Philippe Major's work in a research project based at the University of Basel. "We are looking at the people who advocated a revival of Confucianism. We focus on figures from the 20th and 21st centuries," he outlines. Confucianism itself is a very contested tradition, says Dr Major's colleague Professor Ralph Weber, the leader of the project. "Some think of Confucianism as a philosophy, others

as a religion, others as a family-centered social order," he acknowledges. "We study a group of philosophers, so we treat Confucianism mainly as a philosophy."

This philosophical tradition is very diverse, and different thinkers have very different ideas about what Confucianism is. One important dimension of Confucianism is an emphasis on self-cultivation and self-improvement. "For example, there's an assumption among modern Confucians that there is such a thing as a moral metaphysics. So there is some metaphysical ground for morality that is expressed through moral praxis," says Dr Major. It is very difficult for Western philosophers to accept the idea that

there is a moral metaphysics however. "How would you explain that there is a metaphysics that sustains our moral praxis if we come from animals?" asks Dr Major. "One way we can think about the project is that we explore modern Confucianism on the basis of ideas drawn from the sociology of philosophy. Very little work has been done on the sociology of non-Western philosophies."

Modern Confucianism

The modern Confucians are usually portrayed as contributing to discussions about modernity. They are typically regarded as a conservative group that accepts modernity on some grounds, but also

criticises it on others. “Modern Confucians would agree in some ways with the ideas of Max Weber about the ‘iron cage,’” says Dr Major. The modern Confucians also share a certain patriarchal understanding of the world, another topic that researchers are exploring in the project by looking at texts, pictures and photographs. “No woman has managed to integrate and advance in the modern Confucian movement to the extent that they could be viewed as one of its main representatives,” continues Dr Major. “The modern Confucians don’t usually deal very much with gender issues. One of the questions we want to ask is whether this is representative of a patriarchal understanding of society that is implicit in their philosophy.”

This is one of several different strands of research, with Professor Weber and his colleagues examining the work of several modern Confucians, including those who stayed on the mainland following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Civil War. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, and the ruling Communists had a complicated relationship with Confucianism, making it a difficult environment for those Confucian philosophers who stayed. “One of our projects looks at these philosophers. They had to present their philosophy within a Marxist-Leninist framework. How did they

deal with that?” says Professor Weber. They had a choice between concealing their ideas in a kind of code, renouncing Confucianism in favour of Marxist-Leninist thinking, or adapting Confucianism to the dominant ideology. “Some of these philosophers were quite outspoken about Confucianism before 1949, so for them the Communist victory marked a real break,” continues Professor Weber.

A further part of the project involves looking at the work and life of philosophers who left the Chinese mainland, for example to Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the US, where they had greater freedom to express Confucian ideas. These exiled philosophers often felt a deep sense of resentment towards some of those who had stayed and whom they viewed as complicit in legitimising the Chinese Communist Party. “Some philosophers tried to reconcile Marxism with Confucianism,” explains Dr Major. These philosophers were living in a dramatic period of social and political change, sometimes dealing with the psychological effects of being exiled from their homeland, and Professor Weber believes it’s important to consider the wider context in which they developed their ideas. “When we read these texts for their philosophy, wouldn’t we profit from factoring in the intellectual history of the author, what they went through?” he argues.

Sociology of philosophy

The project uses ideas from the sociology of philosophy to look at the context in which a text was written. Some people argue that philosophy should be read purely on its own terms, while others believe that works should be placed in their historical context. Now Professor Weber is adopting a different perspective. “The sociology of philosophy is really a different level to look at this. We think of it as the meso-level,” he outlines. This is not just about reading a specific text in its historical context, but also about considering the motivations of the author and the sociological background to the work. “The use of approaches from the sociology of philosophy is highly innovative,” continues Professor Weber. “We believe that approaching texts through this institutional meso-level, and considering the sociological dimensions, makes for better philosophy. It can help us to understand the philosophical message of a text better.”

By bringing ideas from other disciplines to the project, the researchers hope to open up new perspectives on modern Confucianism and so gain deeper insights. Modern Confucians were often part of wider groups and formed collaborative networks through universities, research associations and other institutions, a topic that Professor Weber and his team are exploring

in a digital humanities project. “We want to highlight those networks more than individuals, we want to see them through a different lens,” he explains. There is a sociological aspect to this research, involving theories about networks and group behaviour, so Professor Weber says it has been essential to collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines. “This research couldn’t be done solely by philosophers,” he stresses. “A lot of our colleagues are either philosophers or historians, but we are now also collaborating with sociologists.”

The aim in this project is to develop a database of modern Confucians and their works over the period between 1911-2011, which will provide a solid basis to demonstrate connections between them. This work involves not just drawing on data but also creating it, which could open up new avenues of investigation. “There are categories in the database that will allow researchers to reconstruct networks of modern Confucians. Who was doing what with whom? On which boards were they sitting together? Which journals did they found?” outlines Professor Weber. This approach could also be used by groups in other areas of research, although the primary focus for Professor Weber is the modern Confucians, and he

hopes the database will help uncover some interesting details. “We might discover some new figures in there that hadn’t previously been thought of as central to this tradition,” he says.

Modern China

This research is designed to shed new light on modern Confucianism, and to develop a deeper understanding of non-Western philosophy. While there is a purely philosophical side to this work, it also holds wider relevance in terms of understanding modern China and its leaders. “It’s important to try to understand how traditions are being drawn on by political actors in China, how they are instrumentalised,” says Professor Weber. These philosophers often acted as scholar-officials who were concerned with the fate of their country, and in many cases they enjoyed access to powerful people. “This access to power is a really central part of the story,” continues Professor Weber. “These philosophers perform a deeply culturally rooted function of the scholar-official, of caring about China. This is almost a characteristic of Chinese intellectuals in the 20th century.”



Ralph Weber (left) meets with modern Confucian Tu Weiming (right) at the Mencius temple in Zoucheng in 2007.

We are looking at **the people who advocated a revival of Confucianism.**
We focus on **figures** from the **20th and 21st centuries.**



Former residence of modern Confucian Ma Yifu in Hangzhou.

THE EXTERIOR OF PHILOSOPHY

The Exterior of Philosophy: On the Practice of New Confucianism

Project Objectives

One of the largest research groups specialized in modern Confucianism outside of East Asia, The Exterior of Philosophy adopts Sociology of Philosophy perspectives to study the impact of social factors on modern Confucian philosophical practices. The project explores the possibilities of deploying Sociology of Philosophy perspectives for philosophical aims.

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