

## Rethinking Reconstructionist Confucianism's Rethinking

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Lauren F. Pfister

## RETHINKING RECONSTRUCTIONIST CONFUCIANISM'S RETHINKING

### ABSTRACT

In this review of Ruiping Fan's book, I am concerned first of all about how representative his account of "Confucianism" / Ruism is in relationship to the multiform traditions associated with that teaching through more than 2000 years of its existence. Fan emphasizes pre-imperial forms of Confucian traditions, but neglects many alternatives from later sources. Secondly, his account of "familism" lends itself to questions related to the problem of revenge that is associated with traditional Confucianism. This raises further ethical doubts about the effectiveness of his reconstructed Confucianism within contemporary Chinese society. Finally, his "familism" appears to focus on extended family structures, but whether this is suitable and relevant for the structures of modern family transformations in mainland China is questioned.

In this volume Ruiping Fan, professor in the Department of Public and Social Administration in the City University of Hong Kong, presents a wide-ranging discussion of the relevance of a selected set of Confucian teachings for contemporary modern living. The term "reconstructionist Confucianism" intends to portray his particular way of offering arguments for the contemporary relevance of certain Ruist ("Confucian") teachings in Chinese societies; sometimes his arguments become more generalized, portraying what Fan would present as a new and vital paradigm for any form of human flourishing.

The main themes of the book reflect a discernment the author is making

regarding post-secular trends in contemporary China and international settings (see Pfister 2012), Fan himself serving as a post-secular Ruist intellectual, but one with only a modicum of spiritual interests (seen in brief references to ritual sacrifices and the nature of *tian* 天). Though this tendency is manifest, Fan's arguments are steadily focused on overcoming "the Western" account of liberal individualism; the whole tome presents a multi-faceted discursive engagement with representatives of this particular tradition among North American and European philosophers and other intellectuals. As a consequence, the volume offers challenges to various alternatives associated with "Western" philosophical, political and ethical traditions, particularly in their more liberal and individualistic expressions, while simultaneously presenting a new brand of Confucianism which Fan himself represents.

Taking the role of a sympathetic but not neutral interlocutor, I will present in what follows three main critical perspectives which I sense require Fan's further elaborations and/or justifications.

First of all, how representative is "reconstructionist Confucianism"? What are the authoritative bases for re-presenting Ruism in Fan's book? Is it linked only to canonical literature, or include certain mainline traditions, or even refer to various sub-traditions within Ruist history at times? In fact, the most prominent figures are pre-imperial age Ruists: Masters Kong 孔子, Meng 孟子, and Xun 荀子, along with

the sage Shun 舜. Nevertheless, the most often cited texts are the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *The State of Equilibrium and Harmony* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), *The Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), and *The Ceremonial Rites* (*Yili* 儀禮). In fact, then, we find three of the Four Books referred to often enough (*Daxue* 大學 [*The Great Learning*] is not so prominent), but very little of the Song dynasty Ruists who made those Four Books so prominent. The ritual texts had important influences as canonical or sub-canonical literature starting from the Han dynasty (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.) onward, but we do not hear much at all about other of the Five Scriptures (*wujing* 五經) or their commentaries, except for the *Yijing* 《易經》 in the context of Fan's reflections on environmental ethics. What this suggests is that Fan's account is particularly reliant on pre-imperial Ruist traditions. His "reconstructionist" project is, in fact, more traditionalist in orientation; he is seeking to restore ancient values, institutions and rites, insisting on their relevance to contemporary Chinese societies. While some of the values can be presented as diachronic values worthy of consideration by Chinese persons and also those outside of China, stretching toward claims that may assert universalizability, there are institutions and rites that may not be so easily extended, and some which are more complex and problematic than Fan leads us to believe. It is very notable, therefore, that Fan in the vast majority of his manuscript does not refer very often, if at all, to later Ruist traditions, commentaries and schools which

arose during the Tang 唐, Song, Ming 明 or Qing 清 dynasties. Why should this be considered an important matter for consideration in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

There is a pattern of thought within contemporary Ruist discourse that tends to make a particular position into “the Ruist position” without providing adequate support and argumentation to assert these general claims.<sup>1</sup> What we know with certainty from a historical point of view is that Ruist traditions are multiform, not always consonant with each other, and sometimes even set in contrast with earlier Ruist teachings, criticizing them as inadequate, misguided, or lacking the sagely insight required by the newly emerging school that makes these claims. In this light, then, we see Fan’s “reconstructionist Confucianism” as fitting into this discursive plurality, and needing to qualify his position accordingly, indicating why he would prefer certain scriptures and teachings to others within the vast and multiform traditions which constitute the more than bimillennial expressions of Ruism. Careful reading of his monograph notes these matters when Fan claims to present “the Confucian position” instead of “a Confucian position”;<sup>2</sup> the former suggests that there is only one such position, where at other times Fan himself is explicit that in some realms many alternative positions are taken by informed Ruists.<sup>3</sup> This ambivalence leads to interpretive difficulties for those unaccustomed to reading in

Ruist traditions, and provokes questions about the nature of some generalizations and their truth claims for those who are sensitive to the diversities within the historical Ruist traditions.

Making a “return to the origins of a tradition” is a hermeneutic strategy assuming that a serious corrective to all subsequent traditions must be pursued in order for a suitable reconstruction of the tradition to take place. This is a forceful and demanding task, since it should demonstrate in fact that all those other traditions (stretching 2200 years from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century before the Christian era till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have either veered off the course, have become irreparably compromised, or are totally irrelevant to the demands of the current age. Such a wide ranging critique is not offered in Fan’s book; nevertheless, he does explicitly distance himself from the 20<sup>th</sup> century “contemporary Neo-Confucians” who were “colonized by modern Western notions” and so are considered “untrue to the Confucian tradition itself” and therefore “disable the capacities of Confucian wisdom to address the problems of our times” (Fan 2010: xii). Still, one might ask whether or not the humane, rational and synthetic teachings of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), or the practical intuitive wisdom of Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578-1645), or the liberal populist political vision expressed in the democratically-leaning writings of Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) might also serve as suitable creative resources for such

a 21<sup>st</sup> century reconstructed Ruism. For example, does Zhu Xi's construction of the *xin-xing* 心性 anthropology and its inherent metaphysics add strength to the humanist and relational claims Fan wants to assert? Does Liu Zongzhou's active form of whole person cultivation fit more readily into Fan's way of accounting for family and virtue ethics, and open another interpretive approach to medical ethics and business ethics? Do either of Zhu Xi's or Liu Zongzhou's understanding of human cultivation provide any new insights into the account of a Ruist form of personhood which Fan emphasizes in the final chapters of his book? Could Huang Zongxi's political reformist position that comes close to democratic forms of government be a resource that could provide new justifications for alternative forms of public policies in contemporary China? These alternatives are not mentioned, but they do seem as though they could be significantly relevant to a "reconstructionist" Ruist project.

Is there here in Fan's monograph an assumption of a "pure Ruism" that cannot be "tainted" by other traditions, even in spite of the fact that Ruist traditions across more than two millennia have regularly engaged other Chinese schools of thought and have at times made creative syntheses out of these traditions? Must reconstructionist Ruism stand only in opposition against liberal morality represented by "the West" (which is in fact not uniform, but a plurality as well), or can it join and synthesize with other more suitable traditions in Europe, North America, Japan, Korea, India or

elsewhere? We would want to know more from Fan about whether or not cultural syntheses of these sort are appropriate and justified in 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese contexts; if they are not, then we would want to hear more about the reasons why they are not suitable.

Secondly, the use and interpretation of traditional Ruist rites to ground a distinctive account of personhood as well as “familist” forms of interactions and duties leads to a number of other questions. Is this form of traditionalist Ruist discourse promoting values and conceptual accounts actually more restrictive than Fan would like to admit? While the lengthy discussions related to rituals as “closed” and “quasi-closed rites” is worked out in detail (Fan 2010: 168-172), it is notable that “familist” forms of ritual propriety are only couched in terms of mutual respect based upon “differentiated love” (Fan 2010: 30, 53-54), but do not include reference to the problem of filially inspired forms of revenge which also stem directly from this “familist” orientation.<sup>4</sup> Within *The Record of the Rites* there are explicit arguments justifying revenge on the basis of a son’s duty to his parents and elder relatives.

Zixia 子夏 asked Master Kong [Confucius], ‘How should (a son) conduct himself with reference to the man who has killed his father and mother?’ (*Ju fumu zhi chou, ru zhi he* 居父母之仇, 如之何) The Master said, ‘He should sleep on straw, with his shield for a pillow; he should not take



office; he must be determined not to live with the slayer under the same heaven (*fu yu gongtianxia ye* 弗與共天下也). If he met him in the market-place or the court, he should not have to go back for his weapon, but (instantly) fight with him.’

‘Allow me to ask,’ said (the other), ‘how one should do with reference to the man who has slain his brother?’ ‘He may take office,’ was the reply, ‘but not in the same state with the slayer; if he be sent on a mission by his ruler’s order, though he may then meet with the man, he should not fight with him.’

‘And how should one do,’ continued Zixia, ‘in the case of a man who has slain one of his paternal cousins?’ Master Kong said, ‘He should not take the lead (in the avenging). If he whom it chiefly concerns is able to do that, he should support him from behind, with his weapon in his hand.’(Legge 1986: 140)<sup>5</sup>

To the contrary, however, one finds that Master Meng argues for quite the opposite moral conviction, equating the killing of another’s relatives as tantamount to paricide and fratricide.

Master Meng said, ‘Only now do I realize how serious it isto kill a member of the family of another man. If you killed his father, he would kill your father; if you killed his elder brother, he would kill your elder brother. This being the case, though you may not have killed your father and brother with your own hands, it is but one step removed. (Lau 1983: 195)

Obviously, there is a moral conflict between these two positions within the Pre-Qin Ruist scriptures which Fan refers to. This being the case, what moral principles are applied to Fan’s version of “familism” that would address this matter? Is revenge of the murder of one’s relatives morally acceptable or not? If so, how would one deal with Master Meng’s moral misgivings? If not, why not?

Since Fan is also concerned about perceived imbalances and injustices in the current Chinese legal system, questions about how revenge should be handled would arise from other Ruist traditions. The profound impact that acts of revenge had on ancient and imperial Chinese societies has been documented in recent years by Wang Li 王立 (see Wang 2011) and Li Xianlong 李獻隆,<sup>6</sup> indicating how legal traditions had to be created in later dynasties to stifle the social chaos caused by zealous relatives and “righteous chivalry” (*yixia* 義俠). Fan’s presentation on the rites, therefore, may appear to some as being discursive disinformation; more charitably, it involves a selective use of canonical sources which may not reveal all the ways in which Ruist traditions have been expressed and how they still might be reconstructed.

Another particular illustration of how this traditionalist attitude reveals itself is in the context of the emphatic promotion of filial duties required of adult children in caring for their elderly parents (Fan 2010: 94-95). Fan claims Ruist principles require adult children to offer sacrificial personal care for aging parents; he consequently appears to be unwilling to offer any flexibility that would allow for managerial alternatives (whether hiring help or arranging for hospice care). So one can be driven to ask, in our contemporary Chinese social settings, where both spouses in a growing family are working and not necessarily trained or able to handle the medical needs of their elderly parents or grandparents, is it inherently unfilial for them

to hire part-time hospice care, or other medical professionals, who can assist them in caring for their parents at home? While a familist may see this as a reason for requiring more government support for home-care, a point that Fan does point out, there is less willingness on his part to consider any moral alternatives besides the direct personal care of adult children for ailing parents and grandparents. Whether this opens a door to a more litigious form of Ruist ethics, rather than a more compassionate and wide-ranging dynamic way of handling these matters in contemporary social settings, is worth reconsidering.

Thirdly, is the familist form of family actually the most appropriate form of Ruist family? Fan speaks at times as if Ruist families are actually nuclear families (Fan 2010: 15), but later he clarifies that the “natural” character of the standard Ruist family should include “three generations” living together (Fan 2010: 93). But traditional Ruist family structures were paternalistic in hierarchy and were extended to include persons who were related to one through an extensive network of relational ties (as enshrined in the Qing dynasty code, for example).<sup>7</sup> Why does Fan not promote the traditional extended family as the standard for reconstructionist Ruism? If not, why has it been transformed into something other? On what hermeneutic basis has this been done?

In fact, it is now known that in modern China, there are more nuclear families in

the large cities than other kinds of families, something never previously known in China. This fact challenges Fan's traditionalist assertions. How does reconstructionist Ruism address modern Chinese trends in family life: personal and familial inheritance questions (reinstated in the China in March 2004), the problems of singleton children, and the increasing divorce rates? If Ruist reconstructions of family values do not also deal with these problems either theoretically or practically, would they then be perceived as being traditionalist alternatives which are ultimately anachronous?<sup>8</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For example, there is no overriding worldview or set of values that links together the contributors to the two-volume work edited by Tu and Tucker (Tu and Tucker 2003–2004), underscoring the diversity of traditions and interpretations involved in Ruist traditions. The manifest plurality of Ruist schools, teachings, and orientations, both within China and in cultures influenced by Ruist teachings (including Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures), has been once more highlighted in the two-volume work edited by Yao (Yao 2003). Furthermore, the five-volume set of studies by the Beijing Daxue Rucang Bianzuan Yu Yanjiu Zhongxin 北京大學《儒藏》編纂與研

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究中心(Beijing Daxue 2009–2013) as well as the nine-volume set under the general editorship of TANG Yijie 湯一介 and LI Zhonghua 李中華(Tang and Li 2011) underscore this plurality within Chinese contexts as well, so that a well-informed study of Ruist traditions should always identify its particular commitments within the broader range of Ruist schools. When Fan refers to “a Confucian position,” he is therefore heading in the right direction, and should provide further justification for why he has chosen those particular scriptures and texts to advocate his “reconstructionist” vision.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes “the Confucian” stance and “a Confucian” position appear in the same page, such as in the Table of Contents (Fan 2010: viii, Sections 7.3 and 7.4) or within a particular discussion (as on Fan 2010: 187).

<sup>3</sup> For example, a diversity of Ruist opinions related to bioethics and health care concerns is admitted (Fan 2010: 21 and 106 respectively).

<sup>4</sup> Fan focuses his discussion of ritual propriety on the first book (Quli 曲禮) of The Book of Rites, but already in the second book (Tangong 檀弓) that one finds the famous discussion between Zixia 子夏 and Master Kong about how revenge is justified for filial sons whose parents and other close relatives have been murdered. This is only the first of a number of texts that advocates this ethical requirement for filial sons. See the commentary produced in the Qing dynasty, Liji Zhengyi 禮記正義 (Kong 1990: 132); English rendering can be found in Legge 1885: 140–141.

<sup>5</sup> I have inserted a contemporary Chinese version for the name of the disciple, and used “Master Kong” to replace Legge’s “Confucius.” A Chinese version of this

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classical passage can be found in Qing dynasty scholar SUN Xidan's 孫希旦 *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (Sun 1989: 200–201).

<sup>6</sup> LI Xianlong is the head of the Chinese Department at the National Taiwan University, and has written seven articles on this theme during the last ten years. Starting with the Pre-Qin period, he has produced articles dealing with varying aspects of vengeance and the legal efforts to restrain it, completing his studies up through the Song dynasty. Among the representative articles are Li 2005, 2009, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The traditional phrase for dealing with the most serious crimes is that not only the criminal would be executed, but also persons related to the person “to the ninth degree” were also to be found and executed. If one’s cousin and second cousin are relatives in the second and third degree, one can imagine how very extensive this familial network would be.

<sup>8</sup> Questions related to these matters are developed at greater length in Pfister 2011. One will find some extended discussion of Fan’s claims related to these themes near the end of that article.

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