The possibility of a Confucian modernity that would reconcile Confucianism with the central concepts and practices of Western modernity was one of the main driving forces behind the thought of MOU Zongsan 牟宗三. Reflecting the unfading relevance of this topic to the current situation, Mou’s vision and theoretical framing of such a recasting of Confucianism provides the thematic spine to YAN Binggang’s stimulating and well worth reading introduction to the work of one of the most important Chinese thinkers of the last century.

Before reviewing Yan’s book in more detail, two general features of this excellent introduction deserve to be highlighted in advance. As far as the judgment of a non-native speaker can be relied on, the analysis of Mou’s thought stands out by its clear and unpretentious style that makes it accessible to everyone. This is in part due to the endeavor of the author to clarify as far as possible the sometimes awkward concepts introduced by Mou. Beyond that, the reader will appreciate the refreshing critical distance the author displays throughout the book, which definitely helps the reader to further engage with Mou’s philosophy at some of its central joints.

In the first three parts of the book, which include an informative foreword (Introduction), a helpful biography of MOU Zongsan with an annexed periodization of his work (Chapter 1), and an extensive presentation of his interpretation of the history of Chinese thought (Chapter 2), Yan familiarizes the reader with the general frame and direction of Mou’s thought. Although much more comment would be appropriate, I confine myself to one footnote: what strikes the reader most in these first three parts is the considerable amount of attention Yan pays to Mou’s historical work in the second chapter. This certainly provokes the question why, in Mou’s eyes, such an intensive engagement with the history of Chinese philosophy is indispensable for the project of a Confucian modernity if, at the same time, one of the cornerstones of his thought is, as it will turn out later on, the possibility of intellectual intuition, that is, a
type of knowledge that is independent of any historical preconception. Beside the hint
that a Confucian modernity needs to be mediated by a rereading of the formative
Confucian texts (46), the author unfortunately does not further tackle this question.

Getting to the core of the matter, Chapter 3 addresses in more detail Mou’s account
of a Confucian modernity, that is, a transfiguration of Confucianism through an
intensive dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition. In a very accessible way
Yan first introduces the different conceptual categories Mou uses to differentiate and
line up both traditions. These distinctions, which map two different “ways of thinking
about problems” (149), may be boiled down to the distinction between a more holistic
and practical way of approaching problems and questions that is predominant in the
Chinese tradition and crystallizes in the Confucian conception of morality, and a more
analytic and theoretical paradigm, that finds its representative expression in the ancient
Greek ideal of science and the Western idea of a democratic political system (146–149,
182–187). Although these distinctions remain highly problematic (161), they nonethe-
less constitute the framework within which the possibility of a Confucian modernity is
further fathomed by Mou. Believing that both traditions are one-sided, Mou bets on a
partial correction of the Chinese paradigm through engraftments from Western con-
ceptual resources. Confident that this transformation will eventually lead to a modern-
ization of Confucianism (170–178), Mou clearly aligns the whole process toward a
regeneration of the Chinese paradigm, thus giving it priority in all respects. Yan,
however, challenges this project by pointing out a number of critical points. Two of
them deserve special attention (190).

A first critic Yan brings forward addresses the concrete relation between the two
conceptual paradigms and, correspondingly, between the three spheres of morality,
science, and democracy. According to the author, it remains unclear how these three
spheres should be related to one another in the above-mentioned transformation
process. Although one could have wished a more detailed elaboration of this critic,
which, put this way, remains too unspecific, Yan’s comment points however to a
fundamental problem of Mou’s account: the integration of the three spheres implies
that the scope of every sphere has to be constrained with regard to the two other
spheres. As this leaves much room for variations, the problem emerges how to
adequately delimit the three spheres. Mou certainly reduces the range of variations
by giving priority to morality over the two other spheres, which mainly have the
function to guarantee its implementation (18, 185). The difficulty to determine the
exact boundaries however remains: according to what criterion can we draw the
dividing lines, and to what extent can we license science and democracy to lose some
of their competences? Whatever criterion turns out to be decisive, the Western reader
will furthermore want to know to what extent it will remain valid for a possible parallel
transformation of the Western paradigm.

The second criticism Yan advances accuses Mou of staying too engaged with a
tradition that would hardly convince non-Confucians. The author, however, does not
further clarify why the unwillingness to transcend the standpoint of Confucianism
toward a more neutral perspective should be a problem for Mou. To be a defender of
Confucianism certainly cannot be as such a good reason for criticizing someone. One
can however read Yan’s criticism against the background of the problem of evaluative
pluralism. From this perspective Mou would indeed appear as an advocate of a
comprehensive doctrine that could hardly become the basis for common moral or