Jiang, Qing 蔣慶, *Discussing Broadly Political Confucianism* 廣論政治儒學

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**Jiang Qing 蔣慶** is widely known as a proponent of a political Confucianism, that is, a Confucian outlook that addresses more directly than other strands of Confucianism issues related to the basic social and political structure of a modern (Chinese) society. The version Jiang favors holds that there exists an objective normative order that obtains independently of our practical standpoint and that we can somehow access in order to consult it as a standard to design and justify specific social and political institutional arrangements (44–45). Much of Jiang’s work aims at drawing a picture of the basic institutional framework that follows from the presupposed objective standard. The recently published collection of shorter texts to be reviewed here takes up all the themes that run through Jiang’s work. As it does not, however, include new texts that would further develop his account, it might run the risk of being overlooked in the shadow of his previous publications. This would be an undeserved fate since the book has distinct merits of its own that prevent it from ending up as a superfluous collection.

The book covers the period from 1989 to 2012 and gathers relatively short texts, some unpublished before, all related to the author’s conception of a political Confucianism. Most of the texts were written at the occasion of conferences and public lectures, which gives the collection a specific “public character.” This character is further reinforced by the inclusion of four interviews as well as several letters the author wrote to some of his most important interlocutors. The appeal of this book does not reside, as already hinted at, in that it would further elaborate the author’s theoretical framework or uncover hitherto concealed aspects of his account. Its strength rather lies in the “public character” just mentioned. Since most texts address a larger public, they unfold Jiang’s cosmos in a very accessible way; and as the author engages repeatedly with other scholars, the book allows the reader furthermore to locate Jiang’s theory...
within the broader landscape of the ongoing debates. At the end, the collection thus turns out to be a convenient introduction to Jiang’s political thought that provides all those interested in his work with a useful initial orientation. Given the condensed and accessible style of the texts, the book can be recommended in a further respect: it allows the reader to get the problems and internal frictions of Jiang’s theoretical account right on the table. The collection opens the door for a first critical engagement with the author without, however, dispensing the reader from having a further look at Jiang’s previous publications. Some ink having already been spilled on critical discussions of Jiang’s account (see, e.g., David Elstein’s thoughtful comments in his *Democracy in Contemporary Confucian Philosophy* [New York: Routledge, 2015]), I will confine myself to mention but three problems that, at least in my eyes, should not remain unmentioned. Given the limited space, I shall leave out the details.

(1) As noted above, one feature of Jiang’s political theory consists in the assumption that at the bottom of the political realm (see for its rather broad definition on 278) we find some objective normative truth (4, 23, 44–45). The business of politics thus mainly consists in realizing this truth by embodying it in an adequate institutional arrangement with the not very surprising addendum that the Confucian political outlook, or at least Jiang’s interpretation of it, presents the best starting point for this project. By assuming an evaluative truth that holds independently of our evaluative attitudes, however, Jiang runs into several difficulties. Leaving problems related to the exact metaphysical status of the normative truth (see, e.g., 257–258) as well as perplexities regarding the possibility of accessing it aside, Jiang is confronted with a quandary when it comes to clarifying the relation between evaluative truth and China’s historical developments. The basic problem is this: if there is no relation between normative truth and the course of history, historical developments have nothing to do with evaluative truth. Jiang would then have to come to the skeptical conclusion that, as an integral part of these processes, our evaluative judgments are mostly off track. If history happens to converge nonetheless with normative truth, this would be a mere matter of chance letting the look at history as uninformative as before with regard to normative issues. This is however a consequence Jiang would reject, given that in his eyes history can figure as a source of political legitimacy. What then if, on the contrary, he would assume that some relation holds between the normative truth and history? History would then most likely have to be understood as tracking the normative truth. At first appearance, Jiang seems to have some sympathy for such a tracking relation. In a large-scale narrative he depicts Chinese culture as having found in Confucianism its “right track” (*zheng gui* 正軌) through a process that was sustained by broad historical forces and trends (214–222). Such a tracking relation remains hard to be made sense of against the background of our usual standards of scientific evaluation, and, as far as I see, Jiang does not try to further clarify this relation. This is all the more regrettable given that this problem also affects his account of political legitimacy.

(2) Jiang defends a specific account of political legitimacy he considers to be superior to Western accounts. The distinguishing feature of his account consists in that it tries to integrate three different sources of legitimacy (see, e.g., 277–282). The three sources of political legitimacy consist in the way of heaven as the sacred source, in humanity and the will of the people as the popular source and in culture and history (also referred to as “earth”) as the historical source. If one takes this account seriously, the political system has to be designed along these three sources, which is best