CHAPTER 6
A MODERN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY
BUILT UPON CRITICALLY RECEIVED
TRADITIONS: FENG YOULAN’S
NEW PRINCIPLE-CENTERED
LEARNING AND THE QUESTION
OF ITS RELATIONSHIP TO
CONTEMPORARY NEW RUIST
(“CONFUCIAN”) PHILOSOPHIES

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The Need to Decode Confused Attributions

In his recent book on “new traditionalism” (xin chuantongzhuyi 新傳
統主義) Zheng Jiadong 鄭家棟 refers to Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–
1990) as part of a broader movement to reinstate selective traditional
concepts within the framework of a distinctively modern style of
Chinese philosophizing. Much to his credit, Zheng handles the varying
philosophical concerns of Feng’s controversial career before and after
the establishment of the People’s Republic in China in 1949 with con-
siderable objectivity, recognizing that Feng’s writings display some very
new interests after that watershed event. In addition, he notes Feng’s
consistent concern to build an interpretative bridge—or perhaps it is
better to speak of him building several different bridges at various
times during his long career—between the traditional concepts he
coined as early as 1931 as “Chinese philosophical” ideas, and the mod-
ern “Western” and later explicitly “Marxist” philosophical concepts to
which he regularly compared them.¹
Zheng’s employment of this new reference term, “new traditionalism,” is a creative development of his own previous writing about the history of certain twentieth-century Chinese philosophical movements. It is a particularly apt way of referring to the various forms of philosophical expression that struggled to gain a hearing over the negatively critical and diametrically opposed modern movements among Chinese intellectuals throughout the same period. Some of these “modernists,” such as Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), preferred asserting a critical reconstruction of all traditional philosophy and literature on the basis of his Sinified form of pragmatism. In Hu’s particular case, he also promoted a modernization process that invoked “Westernization” as the primary goal. Others, such as the Marxist intellectual Hou Wailu 侯外廬 (1903–88), preferred leveling their critiques against earlier intellectual traditions by challenging the normal interpretations of the classical canon and asserting a standard of criticism relying explicitly on dialectical materialism. “New traditionalism” suggests rightly that conservative responses to these modern critical approaches were conceived and worked out by a relatively small group of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals. Nevertheless, the general phrase could also include Daoist and Buddhist thinkers as well as those in the Ruist camps. In fact, Zheng keeps his focus firmly on more or less conservative Ruist intellectuals, not yet extending this potentially fruitful coining of a new category into these other “traditionalist” realms.²

In spite of his helpful coining of this “new traditionalist” category for offering an understanding of twentieth-century conservative philosophical developments in mainland China, Zheng nevertheless has still not been able to free his discussion from issues related to an earlier frame of reference addressed under the rubric of “New Ruists (Confucians)” (xin Ru 新儒), “Contemporary Ruists” (dangdai Rujia 當代儒家), and/or “Contemporary New Ruists” (dangdai xin Rujia 當代新儒家). In fact, Zheng was one of the major intellectuals who helped to conceptualize not only this terminology, but also to give it a distinctive genealogy. In his 1990 book, Xiandai xin Ruxue gailun 現代新儒學概論 (Introductory Essays on Contemporary New Ruist Learning), Zheng explicitly spoke of “three generations” of “New Ruists.” The first generation included Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), Zhang Junmai 張君勭 (1887–1969), and Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968); the second, Feng Youlan, He Lin 贺麟 (1902–92), and Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990); the third, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–95), Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–78), and Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1903–82).³ Setting forth this chronology at the time suggested that there was an underlying consistency