

Introduction

Conventional wisdom has it that Confucians are, if not conservatives, at least traditionalists. Does the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) not say that Confucius followed the Zhou; that he was a transmitter, not an innovator?¹ Is the history of Confucianism not marked by repeated attempts at returning to the source of tradition, whether this source be found in Old or New Texts, in the Five Classics or the Four Books? To be sure, a number of scholars have emphasized that Confucian traditionalism is not averse to change and innovation (despite what the Confucius of the *Analects* is recorded as having said), nor is it necessarily hostile to the idea that tradition must be adapted to new times, lest it loses its status of tradition and recedes into the ever-expanding dominion of the past.² But to think of Confucianism as iconoclastic seems inappropriate, oxymoronic. And yet in what follows it is argued that Confucian iconoclasm was the most important form, if judged in terms of its success, that the modern Confucian textual response to May Fourth took during the Republican period.

An alternative narrative

The predominant narrative of modern or New Confucianism has it that the movement—if movement there was—emerged in the 1920s as a reaction against May Fourth iconoclasm.³ First and foremost, it gave itself the task of *preserving* tradition and pushing back against calls to bring about the wholesale modernization and westernization of China—the two being often equated in May Fourth parlance. Not that modern Confucians were entirely against modernization. They did recognize the value of science and democracy, and did acknowledge that to preserve tradition, they had to

adapt it to the changing times. Preserving tradition did not entail a simple process whereby the contemporaries would passively inherit what was passed down onto them. It referred to a critical reappraisal of tradition that would abstract from it core values that could remain relevant in the modern period. That preservation left room for adaptation suggests that what the modern Confucians fought against was less modernization than its wholesale advocacy by the protagonists of the May Fourth Movement.⁴

In what follows, I present an alternative narrative, one that builds on the account presented above yet also diverts from it in important ways. Building on recent historiographical trends that have revealed important continuities between the so-called “conservative” and “progressive” intellectuals of the late Qing and early Republican periods,⁵ the new narrative challenges the strict dichotomy between May Fourth iconoclasm and the modern Confucian “preservation” of tradition that forms a long-standing assumption of modern Chinese intellectual history. What was at stake, in the Confucian reaction to May Fourth during the Republican period, was much more complex than the term “preservation” suggests, as it involved, at its very core, questions of authority, of who has the right to speak in the name of tradition and to embody its essence in the changing times of the early twentieth century.⁶ The alternative narrative proposed here pays greater attention to “Confucianism” and “modernity” as contested sites of power relations and to the manner in which “tradition” is reshaped by the discursive space in which it is inserted.

One of the major concerns of the most successful modern Confucian texts of this period is the question of how the authority of tradition can be reclaimed, adapted, and monopolized in textual formations. The resulting Confucianism is presented as an alternative to May Fourth, certainly, but by taking a closer look at the texts, we see that a number of May Fourth tropes were adopted by, and adapted to, the modern Confucian discourse to legitimize it within a discursive milieu significantly shaped by May Fourth assumptions. This does not entail that nothing of significance distinguishes this discourse from that of May Fourth, of course, but rather that both sides availed themselves of similar discursive means—first and foremost iconoclasm—to present their agenda as the only viable option in the context of Republican China.

Adopting a broad definition of “tradition” as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present,”⁷ the following chapters provide a close textual analysis of how the authority of the Confucian tradition, and of tradition more generally speaking, is portrayed and reclaimed

by two Republican-period texts that oppose the May Fourth portrayal of Confucianism as an artifact of the past and enjoyed a significant amount of success after their publication, to the extent that both have been portrayed as foundational texts of modern or New Confucianism: Liang Shuming's (梁漱溟; 1893–1988) *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* (*Dongxi wenhua ji qi zhexue* 東西文化及其哲學; 1921; *Eastern and Western Cultures* hereafter)⁸ and the classical Chinese edition of Xiong Shili's (熊十力; 1885–1968) *New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness* (*Xin weishi lun* 新唯識論; 1932; *New Treatise* hereafter).⁹

The following chapters pay particular attention to two interrelated aspects of the texts: their discourse on the role tradition plays in individual emancipation or in a modernization process teleologically oriented toward human liberty on the one hand, and the discursive techniques they employ to legitimize their discourse with the authority of tradition on the other. My central aim is to see which discursive tools were at the disposal of texts that endeavored to reactivate the authority of the Confucian *dao* (道) within the modern Chinese context, especially as one of their main objectives was to situate themselves within and against a discursive space hegemonized by the iconoclastic discourse of modernity advanced by the May Fourth protagonists.

Based on the close textual analysis that follows, I argue that the most successful modern Confucian texts of the Republican period are nearly as iconoclastic as the most radical of May Fourth intellectuals were, as on the one hand they deny that traditions can contribute to individual emancipation and to the modernization process, and on the other hand they conceptualize emancipation as a breaking free from the hold of tradition. There is an exception to this general rule, however. The Confucian tradition (as they define it) and to some extent the Buddhist one are singled out as traditions that can point the way to a liberation from tradition. Traditions are therefore valueless unless they represent what I call, following Edward Shils, “antitraditional traditions,” or “antitraditions” for short: traditions that reject the value of all other traditions and show the way to a final liberation from the influences of the past.¹⁰

Confucian iconoclasm emerges as a reaction to May Fourth, but it does so less to “preserve” tradition than to subsume and monopolize it through the powerful means afforded by modern iconoclasm. At work in the texts studied is a dialectic whereby they salvage particular traditions that yield transhistorical truths from the dustbin of history before presenting themselves not only as contemporary representatives of such traditions, but also as their pinnacle: a pinnacle that sees the traditions entirely subsumed,

clarified, finalized, and monopolized by the texts. It is by adapting the anti-traditional discourse of modernity to its project that Confucian iconoclasm can present at least the discontinuous tradition of Confucianism, as it defines and subsumes it, as still relevant in the modern age.

The general picture that emerges from the close textual analysis that follows is that of texts engaged less in a politics of tradition than in what I call a “politics of antitradition,” whereby different groups present their own project—May Fourth modernity or iconoclastic Confucianism—as the only one capable of freeing humanity from its situatedness in time and space. In doing so, Confucian iconoclasm reappropriates elements of the antitraditional discourse of modernity to its own ends, but in such a way as to challenge the Eurocentric conceptions of modernity promoted by May Fourth intellectuals and elevate its own Confucianism—in a way that is nearly as hegemonic, if not in actuality at least in its intent—into *the* universal culture capable of emancipating once and for all humanity from the shackles of tradition and history. What the texts propose is not an alternative to iconoclasm, but an alternative iconoclastic tradition to that of May Fourth—an antitradition subsumed under the banner of Confucianism.

The textual authority of tradition

The alternative narrative outlined above not only challenges accounts of the modern Confucian “preservation” of tradition by showing how authority and the monopolization of truth were central concerns of the modern Confucian response to May Fourth in the Republican period, but it also questions the appropriateness of adopting assumptions drawn from the field of classical Confucianism to study the modern period. Even if traditionalism forms one of the central assumptions underscoring a number of ancient texts classified as Confucian, we should nevertheless avoid reading modern Confucian texts through the lens of such assumptions. The emergence of Confucian iconoclasm in the Republican period is after all a new development, even if it is one that significantly borrows from the various sites of tradition, and notably that of the Wang Yangming (王陽明; 1472–1529) branch of Neo-Confucianism, which was better adapted, for reasons I hope will soon become clear, to the iconoclastic motives of the texts under study.¹¹ Yet until we establish, through a close analysis of the texts, which inclinations and intellectual predispositions they inherit from the past, we must be careful not to assume the presence of such inheritances in our approach toward them.

The alternative narrative presented here is also inscribed within a larger reconsideration of the heritage of modernity, one that challenges the assumption that within the modern context, unless they are protected and defended, traditions will inevitably and undoubtedly disappear at some point during the process of modernization.¹² The birth of the museum and the protection of national heritages, to name but two examples, speak to the rising significance of the language of *preservation* in the modern period. Whereas the modern Confucians might have shared at least some of the vocabulary of preservation in the aftermath of May Fourth—they did share with May Fourth thinkers the assumption that the disappearance of Chinese traditions was a potent possibility—the antithetical construal of the modern and the traditional underscored by such views should no longer be taken at face value for us who live in the twenty-first century.

The point is not to negate the fact that an important number of traditions were discontinued or significantly challenged during the modern period. Any historical period characterized by fast-paced transformations inevitably leads to changes in how contemporaries relate to the past (and vice versa). My main concern is rather with the discourse that sees in modernity a continuously renewed caesura with the past, to paraphrase Habermas,¹³ and that makes of this caesura a precondition of human liberty and autonomy. It is important to understand this discourse as a significant component of the phenomenon of modernity rather than an accurate description of it. This discourse informs one of the most enduring discursive traditions of our times: the antitradition of modernity. This antitradition should not be conceptualized as an *ex nihilo* product of the moderns, however. It can perhaps best be described metaphorically as a textile¹⁴ made of relatively novel patterns woven with the threads of tradition; as a reshaping and rearrangement of premodern traditions.¹⁵

While modernity is far from having produced a complete caesura with the premodern, the discourse that claims it did exactly that played a central role in reshaping the ways in which textual authority was performed in the modern period. Before the gradual advent of modernity, an idea could be sanctioned simply by tracing its origin back to an ancient text, or at least by claiming that it had such an origin.¹⁶ The ancients and the classics formed zones of authority from which the contemporaries could draw, insofar as they were conceived as repositories of transhistorical truths passed down through the conduit of tradition.¹⁷ By inserting oneself within such tradition, by learning its language and immersing oneself in its truths, and by commenting on the original meaning of the classics, one could partake

in a ritual of social distinction setting apart an elite having access to trans-historical truths transmitted historically from masses regarded as entirely determined by the historical. For the happy few, transcending history could be transmitted along patriarchal lines of succession.

A complex hermeneutical relation between the ancients and the contemporaries regimented the ways in which the authority standing at the source of tradition could be reclaimed. This could be achieved through established codes of interpretation and commentary, or by claiming that one could build on the solid foundation laid by the ancients.¹⁸ In both cases, what took place was often much more complex than a simple process of transmission or preservation of the originary truth of tradition. Rather, by “shaping the Ancients in authority figures,” in Pascal Payen’s words, one could “make of the temporal distance that separates us from them ‘a transmission that is generative of meaning’” (and authority, I would add).¹⁹ The ancients and the classics thus effectively functioned as means to translate ideas bound by the sociohistorical context of their emergence into transhistorical truths.

The purpose of this hermeneutical model was to mitigate the precariousness constitutive of any form of authority. In essence, authority is never truly “possessed” by anyone, as it is achieved through a social dialectic of recognition that continuously threatens to reverse the balance of power. While a ruler may claim to possess authority, his or her authority is but the result of the recognition of its legitimacy by the ruled.²⁰ To ensure consent and recognition, rulers have historically relied on a number of techniques, from rituals and speech acts aimed at presenting the instituting of the ruler in a position of power as something established independently of the ruled,²¹ to discursive techniques projecting onto the origin of tradition or a transcendent Other the source of the ruler’s authority.²² The goal of such techniques is the naturalization of the authority of the ruler, thanks to which one could hide from the view of the ruled the fact that it is ultimately their recognition that institutes the ruler in a position of authority.

Of course, if their authority fails to be recognized by the ruled, rulers can always resort to coercion. While the unactualized but very real potential of coercion is a unique facet lurking in the background of political authority, resting on the monopoly of violence of the state, epistemic or textual authority has no other alternative but persuasion.²³ Whenever persuasion is insufficient or whenever it fails, the legitimacy of a text rests solely on the authority of its author, which precariously depends on the readers’ willingness to recognize it. To be sure, there are a number of social factors, ranging from the reputation of the author to its affiliation with powerful

institutions and historical figures, that impact the readership's inclination to recognize a text and its author as authoritative. Although such factors play a major role in the social dialectic of recognition, texts also have a vested interest, not unlike rulers, in presenting their positions as resting on grounds that are simply immune from contestation—grounds that cannot but be recognized as legitimate by the readers.

Two of the most important discursive techniques employed by texts to achieve this goal have been (1) that of portraying their own discourse as reactivating the originary, transhistorical truth of a tradition recognized as authoritative within a particular sociohistorical setting, and (2) that of claiming direct access to transhistorical truths, through a faculty (reason or *liangzhi* 良知, for example) expected to be recognized by the target readership as a universal and legitimate means of accessing such truths. Such techniques allow for the dialectic of social recognition to be mediated by a source of authority the legitimacy of which is socially embedded in the (Gadamerian) prejudices of a community.²⁴ By drawing from traditional and transhistorical sources of authority, texts can make it appear as if their authority was already established through socially accepted means, and thus hide from readers the fact that it is ultimately they who provide the authority of a text and its author with legitimacy.²⁵

The antitradition of modernity

Although making the ancients into authority figures whose transhistorical truths could be passed down through the conduit of tradition was undoubtedly a powerful means to bolster the authority of the intellectual and social elite, especially before the advent of modernity, this model of authorization contained the seeds of its own demise. Insofar as one accepts that traditions have origins, that their transhistorical truths were once produced by the ancients in defiance of the historical traditions of their time, one must acknowledge the possibility that at least particularly gifted individuals, such as the ancients themselves, can access transhistorical truths independently of tradition. Within the very existence of the ancients resided the potential of challenging the necessity and authority of tradition.

While this is certainly not the place to provide a novel account of the rise of modernity, suffice it to point out, for the present purpose, that before the modern period, only semi-divine figures of an ancient past were normally portrayed as having the capacity to perceive truth in and

of themselves, without and against tradition. What the moderns did, in a sense, is to claim they could reappropriate for themselves, in a Promethean fashion, the ability to access truths directly and autonomously, outside the dominion of tradition.²⁶ This could be done thanks to the universally shared faculty of reason, which allowed moderns access to the transhistorical without having to rely on the example set forth by the ancients. In sum, we see a gradual and incomplete displacement of the transhistorical, with the advent of modernity, from the originary sources of tradition to the inner core of the emancipated modern subject.

In the process, although the authority of tradition was never entirely eclipsed from the view of the moderns, it was certainly “amputated.”²⁷ Its empire was challenged by the rise of the future, but also reason, autonomy, and the sciences, as the most important modern sources of authority.²⁸ Within what Wang Hui (汪暉) calls the new conception of historical time of modernity, which “moves linearly forward and cannot be repeated,”²⁹ oriented as it is toward a telos of emancipation and truth disclosure, tradition, as the Other of modernity, tends to be construed as lacking in value.³⁰ Or, more to the point, it tends to be regarded as a limitation imposed on the autonomous subject, hindering its apprehension of truth, given how tradition is the product of previous generations mired in the prejudices they themselves acquired from the past. Truth would remain at bay, in short, as long as humanity failed to free itself from prejudices inherited from traditions no longer conceived as emerging in transhistorical sources.

This is, of course, not the whole picture. After all, conservatism represents an important facet of the experience of modernity. But the *mainstream* discourse of modernity against which conservatism defined itself is an antitradition shaped around a new conception of historical time, one that fetishizes the “new” and the “present,” the latter conceptualized less as the outcome of the past than the beginning of the future. As Jürgen Habermas notes in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*:

Because the new, the modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new. Thus, it is characteristic of the historical consciousness of modernity to set off “the most recent [*neuesten*] period” from the modern [*neu*] age: Within the horizon of the modern age, the present enjoys a prominent position as contemporary history [. . .]. A present that understands itself from the

horizon of the modern age as the actuality of the most recent period has to recapitulate the break brought about with the past as a *continuous renewal*.³¹

In other words, modernity presents itself as a dialectic between what-is and a what-ought-to-be no longer informed by the authority of what once was.³²

The iconoclastic stance embedded in the new conception of time could be portrayed by its advocates as working against the monopolization of authority by the church, the aristocracy, and the ruling houses. Yet despite its avowed antipathy toward tradition, the discursive antitradition of modernity can nevertheless be regarded as a tradition in its own right, one that similarly served as a provider of ultimate sources of authority justifying the monopolization of truth by an elite (at a time of accentuated social mobility). Insofar as it could contribute to de-authorizing all other traditions by portraying them as limiting the potential for liberty inherent in human beings, the antitradition of modernity could serve, and has served, as a particularly powerful means through which authority could be monopolized by groups said to incarnate the spirit of all that is modern.

To be sure, a number of traditions presented themselves as purveying their followers with the ultimate truth before the advent of modernity (religions certainly did), and a good number of them did so while claiming all other traditions were either mistaken or inferior. What distinguishes the antitradition of modernity is its ability to hide the fact that it *is* a tradition (and a tradition among others). Instead of relying on the leap of faith central to religious attempts at monopolizing truth, the authority of the antitradition of modernity found solid ground in the belief that its own vision of the world was historically and scientifically proven. The antitraditional discourse of modernity could be employed by various groups seeking to hegemonize their position—be it communist, fascist, or (neo) liberal—by presenting it as the only possible outcome of history, as vetted by the modern tools of scientific historiography. The latter could serve as a new source of authority, one perfectly suited to hide the social dialectic of recognition from the view of those who accepted the metanarrative of modernity as objective and indisputable.

Apart from providing the discursive resources thanks to which members of the elite could present themselves as the incarnation, in the present, of the inevitable and emancipatory future, the new conception of time central to the antitradition of modernity could also be put to the task of sanctioning the enterprises of imperialism and colonialism. It could do so by presenting

them as the only means to free the rest of humanity from its traditional shackles and introduce it in true History—that is, History oriented toward human liberty. Two discursive techniques central to this project of legitimation of the white man’s burden are of particular importance for the present purpose, as they became underlying assumptions, as I hope will become clear in a moment, of May Fourth discourse.

First is the unilinear metanarrative of modernity, which proposed to taxonomize all world cultures within a single developmental model of history according to how far ahead in the progressive path toward the emancipatory telos they were. Insofar as within this metanarrative, the modern cultures of Europe represented the most advanced stage of modernization, they could be depicted as the universal future toward which all of humankind would inexorably evolve. This discourse effected a spatialization of time:³³ it accommodated all cultural spaces within a temporal narrative enabling Europe’s self-portrayal as the emancipatory future of humanity.

Second is what Charles Taylor calls the “acultural understanding of modernity.”³⁴ In such an understanding, modernity is construed not as a historical and cultural product defined by its situatedness in time and space, but as a gradual *discovery* of truth and human autonomy that took place *in spite of* the cultural background of its emergence. Modernity is said to have *naturally* emerged once moderns freed themselves from the prejudices and superstitions that plagued the premodern period. This entails that tradition and modernity stand in opposition to one another, and that they are incompatible and irreconcilable, an assumption that finds itself reflected in a number of dichotomies, between feudalism and freedom, object and subject of history, particularism and universalism, darkness and enlightenment, unreflective and self-conscious subjects, and so forth. Moreover, by naturalizing modernity, this discourse could establish its authority by pretending to be immune from contestation and above the social dialectic of recognition.

Allied to the unilinear metanarrative, the acultural understanding of modernity could provide colonialism with legitimacy. Non-European traditions, relegated to premodernity, could easily be portrayed as limitations imposed on their people’s inherent potential for truth and liberty, a potential that could be realized only thanks to the impetus provided by the European colonial powers. This discourse reinforced the spatialization of time by depicting modern European cultures as inherently universal, while de-authorizing premodern, non-European locales as being held by irrational and servile traditions. Through the process of modernization, non-Europeans

would be gradually uprooted from local cultures, a precondition to being introduced into the universal culture of modernity. Thus conceptualized, modernization involved a process of disembodiment, a passage from place to “placelessness.”

The antitradition of May Fourth

The unilinear and acultural metanarrative of modernity was introduced into China at the end of the nineteenth century, most notably through the medium of social Darwinism. It soon became one of the most important paradigms of understanding the world and China’s place in it during the early Republican period.³⁵ Facing a “crisis of meaning”³⁶ or “consciousness”³⁷ brought about by the disintegration of the sociopolitical order, as well as a sense that China had lost, after the first Sino-Japanese war, the privileged role of civilizational center that was traditionally ascribed to it, the May Fourth intellectual elite was drawn to the antitradition of modernity as an all-encompassing discourse that could make sense of China’s predicament. This suggests that the remarkable translatability of the antitraditional discourse of modernity derives not from its inherent universality, as its proponents would have it, but from its ability (1) to serve as a powerful means to throw light on the historical condition in which the colonies and those subjected to European imperialism found themselves, and (2) to rally the nation-state—this newcomer—around the task of modernization to extricate it from the grasp of foreign powers and achieve the sovereignty promised by the project of modernity.

Besides allowing Chinese intellectuals to make sense of China’s predicament and providing an all-encompassing means to solve it, the acultural and unilinear metanarrative of modernity served another purpose less frequently highlighted by historians. It enabled May Fourth intellectuals to produce a hegemonic discourse that reshaped the rules of intellectual distinction.³⁸ This was made possible by the fact that after the abolition of the imperial examination in 1905, the rules that codified the distribution of cultural and symbolic capital in the economy of the intellectual field had to be reinvented. Chinese intellectuals found themselves in a “conjuncture of organic crisis”: a historical moment that sees the markers of transhistoricity and universality, as cultural commodities of high value, gradually emptied out of their content, notably because of the disintegration of former institutions that guaranteed

a certain stability to the hegemonic order.³⁹ This was a crisis of “meaning” and “consciousness,” but it was also an *institutional* crisis closely tied to a crisis of identity of the intellectual elite.

Before the twentieth century, the *shi* (士) class of scholar-officials had managed to achieve a relatively stable hegemonic position on the grounds that it alone could represent and incarnate traditional inheritances that conveyed transhistorical, universal truths. Although far from unchallenged,⁴⁰ the hegemonic success of the *shi* found support in the imperial court and the examination system—powerful institutions responsible for the production of social distinctions. After 1905, the university system replaced the imperial examination as the main institution through which cultural capital was acquired and transmitted. But in the early years of the Republic, the rules that codified access to the faculties were extremely diverse and porous.⁴¹ Many of the professors filling in the ranks of the new universities were formally trained in the classics.⁴² They competed against intellectuals who were self-taught, others who had received their education in Japan, and those who had been educated in North America or Western Europe.

Within such a conjuncture, the question remained open as to which group would replace the *shi* class by successfully presenting itself as the only social body capable of incarnating the universal in modern China. It is within this context that the May Fourth group deployed a powerful iconoclastic discourse that succeeded, around the turn of the 1920s, in recasting the May Fourth intellectuals as the only legitimate representatives of universality in modern China.⁴³

The hegemonic success of May Fourth, in the intellectual field, was enabled by its adoption of the unilinear and acultural discourse of modernity. The spatial distinction between China and the West was reconceptualized, in this discourse, as a temporal divide within a single, unilinear model of historical development.⁴⁴ Because within this model “feudal” China was behind the “modern” West, by a thousand years on Chen Duxiu’s (陳獨秀; 1879–1942) account,⁴⁵ the West could be presented as the inexorable—and universal—future toward which China had to evolve. Human autonomy and reason, incarnated by the modern West, would naturally emerge provided the Chinese could free themselves from the shackles of feudal traditions. In the social Darwinian terminology of Chen, unless the Chinese recognized the objective tide of history and contributed to bring about its ineluctable end, the Chinese “race” would become unfit for the times and be brought to extinction.⁴⁶ Although Chen depicts the present as a watershed historical moment in which the Chinese have to choose between the modern and

feudal paths,⁴⁷ it is clear that, in his view, the choice is ultimately made by History.

Insofar as the future had already happened in the West, the equation between the universal future and the particular West in May Fourth discourse could be described as indisputably proven by History. May Fourth members could then proceed to suture the modern West, as the new incarnation of the universal, with contents particular to their own agenda. That few readers of *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian* 新青年; changed from *Qingnian* 青年 after the first volume; also known by its French name *La Jeunesse*) and other radical journals of the time had had the opportunity of traveling to the West and seeing it firsthand meant that the May Fourth group could use the “West” as a screen on which to project its own utopian imaginings of the future. As representatives of this future, “Mr. Science” (*sai xiansheng* 賽先生) and “Mr. Democracy” (*de xiansheng* 德先生) could be filled in with the utopian hopes of the May Fourth group.⁴⁸ Through a complex discourse that naturalized their agenda by presenting it as a *descriptive* account of a universal future that had already happened in the West, May Fourth members managed to portray themselves as the new incarnation of the universal.

The antitradition of modernity became, in May Fourth hands, a powerful hegemonic tool to monopolize authority and reject any alternative to the dual empires of science and democracy (as defined by the May Fourth intellectuals). By dressing the “modern West” and “feudal China” into the gowns of universality and particularism, respectively, the May Fourth group proposed a radical iconoclastic discourse in which all discursive positions, except that of May Fourth itself, could be depicted as remnants of the feudal past. Any intellectual who upheld the value of at least certain Chinese traditions, in short anyone who did not agree with May Fourth’s radical iconoclasm, could be presented as the handmaiden of feudalism, patriarchy, and despotism. Chen Duxiu was particularly successful in deploying iconoclastic discursive techniques (reinforced by his unilinear conception of history) in opposition not only to Kang Youwei (康有為; 1858–1927), one of the main objects of his criticism in the second half of the 1910s,⁴⁹ but also to intellectuals who were much more moderate in their appreciation of the past, such as Du Yaquan (杜亞泉; 1873–1933).⁵⁰

Although a number of researchers have rightfully pointed out that the May Fourth attacks on tradition were in fact rather limited in scope, focusing particularly on the Confucian family system and the three bonds (*sangang* 三綱),⁵¹ this should not blind us to the fact that Chen Duxiu and other May Fourth iconoclasts presented their account of Confucianism

as emblematic of the entirety of “feudal China.”⁵² Opposing any form of accommodation between the cultures of China and the modern West, Chen presented the two as essentially antithetical. One had to renounce Confucianism wholesale if one wished to introduce China into the modern age.⁵³ Scientism further strengthened this antitraditional discourse by enabling the rejection of previous forms of knowledge as “superstitious” (*mixin* 迷信).⁵⁴ In an article titled “1916” (“Yijiuyiliu nian” 一九一六年), Chen went so far as to declare that the year 1916 would split history into a before and an after, bringing about a thorough renewal of the individual, the state, society, the family, and the nation.⁵⁵ The introduction of modernity into China, in other words, would proceed from a freeing caesura with the past.

Enabled by the rise of print capitalism, the May Fourth politics of antitradition created a chain of equivalence⁵⁶ uniting, around the magazine *New Youth* and its modernizing agenda, the emerging “westernized” intellectuals and students in their shared opposition to the conservative other constructed in May Fourth discourse. This was May Fourth’s answer to the conjuncture of organic crisis that followed the abolition of the imperial examination in 1905 and the fall of the Qing empire in 1911. Faced with the impressive diversity of the professorial body of the newly established universities and the plethora of voices represented in the growing number of magazines and newspapers published at the beginning of the Republic,⁵⁷ the May Fourth group deployed a politics of antitradition that “sowed the seeds of monologic hegemony that eventually dominated the literary, cultural, and political discourse of modern China.”⁵⁸

Although in the 1920s May Fourth members splintered into different groups—anarchists, liberals, Marxists—they continued to share a common opposition to the so-called traditionalists and conservatives for many years to come. Modernization discourse and the politics of antitradition could be put to the task of legitimizing both liberalism, as represented by the modern West, and Marxism, incarnated by the Bolshevik revolution. Both could be characterized as the only true content filling in the universal future of humanity, but only insofar as the shackles of tradition could be removed from the mind of the new Chinese subject. In this context, intellectuals seeking to reauthorize some form of tradition had to do so in opposition to the modernization metanarratives of liberals and Marxists, as well as to the claim that their program had been vetted by science and the modern rational subject.

The success of May Fourth hegemonic operations should therefore not be thought of in terms of the production of a single and unified discourse

that filled in the universal projected onto the end of unilinear history and embedded in the autonomous subject emancipated from tradition. Different contents of the universal future and the autonomous subject were proposed by the different groups that emerged out of the May Fourth Movement. The hegemonic success of May Fourth discourse should be attributed rather to its ability to set new discursive rules, centered on its politics of antitradition, that both enabled and limited what one could legitimately argue and, equally importantly, on what grounds one could argue it. In short, May Fourth redefined the rules that codified what a legitimate claim to the universal, as cultural capital, ought to look like.⁵⁹

The hegemonic success of May Fourth can be judged by the extent to which discursive positions opposed to it had to comply with its rules in their very attempt at decentering it. It is within this context that Confucian iconoclasm emerged as a *counter-hegemonic project* aimed at opening a discursive space for its Confucian alternative to the hegemonic universalism of May Fourth. This leads us to the following question: within a context that saw the emergence of the unilinear and acultural discourse of modernity, employed by May Fourth protagonists as a means to reshape the rules of intellectual distinction around their agenda, which discursive tools were at the disposal of texts that wished to reappropriate for themselves the authority of a tradition decried as feudal and unfit for modern times?

Confucian iconoclasm

While the relation between textual authority and tradition in classical and Song-Ming Confucianisms has been under study for quite some time,⁶⁰ this topic has not been sufficiently addressed when it comes to modern Confucianism. To be sure, a number of works have dealt with the question of the genealogy of the way (*daotong* 道統), especially in Mou Zongsan's (牟宗三; 1909–1995) discourse,⁶¹ and Yü Ying-shih (余英時) has provided an important critique of the *daotong* logic lending authority to a claimed lineage between Xiong Shili and members of the so-called “second generation” of “New Confucianism.”⁶² But perhaps because the genealogical discourse of the modern Confucian texts of the Republican period, at least certainly those under study here, tends to remain implicit, scholars have tended to neglect the important question of how textual authority is constructed in them.⁶³

Yet the question of how modern Confucian texts attempt to buttress their claims by appealing to the authority of tradition is of utmost

importance, especially since such claims must find an answer to the May Fourth challenge not to appear as partaking in the outdated, feudal tradition decried by the May Fourth group. Attempting to monopolize the authority of the Confucian tradition with some measure of success within a historical context that sees the rise of iconoclastic rejections of that authority represents a novel challenge. Before one can ascribe to oneself the authority of the Confucian tradition within such context, one must first find a way to argue that this tradition is still of value, and do so both *within* and *against* a discursive milieu hegemonized by the antitraditional discourse of May Fourth. Studying how modern Confucian texts responded to May Fourth iconoclasm in their hope to present themselves as reactivating the *dao* thus appears to call for a closer scrutiny of the modes of textual authorization employed by such texts.

In this context, what could be presented, within the Confucian tradition, as valuable with a certain amount of success was greatly constrained by the May Fourth portrayal of Confucianism as supporting a sociopolitical order centered on feudal hierarchies. To escape May Fourth criticism, Confucian iconoclasm had to cleanse itself of the historical manifestations of Confucianism denounced as feudal. To do so, it drew a sharp distinction between what I call *tradition-as-history* and *tradition-as-value*, which made it possible to reject Confucianism's historical manifestations (tradition-as-history) and its enmeshment in state power as a deviation from the true spirit of the tradition, while simultaneously abstracting from the past a number of values purified from history (tradition-as-value).⁶⁴ Confucian iconoclastic texts could thus dissociate *their* Confucianism from that of May Fourth, but in a manner that significantly limited what could be valued of the past. Their rejection of tradition-as-history, for example, explains why their Confucianism is rather depoliticized, and why notions such as those of the three bonds and five relationships (*sangang wuchang* 三綱五常), of ritual (*li* 禮), and of statecraft (*jingshi* 經世), to name but a few, are conspicuously absent from the texts or only briefly mentioned in passing. It also explains why "Confucianism" denotes, in their discourse, a series of ideas rather than social practices, or, in the case of *Eastern and Western Cultures*, a series of ideas that inevitably must become social practices in the future.

The philosophical method played a significant role in enabling Confucian iconoclasm to abstract and immunize Confucianism-as-value from Confucianism-as-history, an essential prerequisite for presenting certain values as transhistorical. Through philosophical means, Confucian iconoclasm sought to answer the May Fourth challenge, first by admitting the Confucian defeat

on the battlefield of history, but only to subsequently win the war on the battlefield of value. Philosophy could help reshape Confucianism into an ahistorical spirit, but in a manner that presumed a strongly iconoclastic stance toward traditions-as-history, given that they had deviated from the ahistorical values abstracted from the past.⁶⁵

The iconoclastic stance toward tradition-as-history of the most successful modern Confucian texts of the Republican period was a product of their attempt at escaping the criticism of their opponents. Their iconoclastic verve, however, extends beyond tradition-as-history and reaches the very tradition-as-value they wish to reactivate. This puzzling conclusion—why would anyone devalue a tradition they claim to represent?—can best be explained by taking a closer look at the texts’ discourse on tradition on the one hand, and at the way they legitimize their discourse with the authority of tradition on the other. While the following chapters provide a detailed analysis of these two layers of the texts, it is worth providing a short outline of the argument that unfolds to clarify the scope of Confucian iconoclasm, both in terms of its discursive content and form.

In terms of their discursive content, both texts deny, as noted above, that traditions can contribute to individual emancipation (in the *New Treatise*) or bring about the historical telos of human liberty (in *Eastern and Western Cultures*), with the exception of the Confucian tradition as they define it, and to some extent the Yogācāra one. Yet insofar as they conceive tradition as a limitation imposed on the autonomous subject, the Confucian tradition can be useful only insofar as it leads to its antithetical end: to a form of experience ultimately freed from the hold of the past. It is of value, in other words, only to the extent that it can be made into an *antitradition*.

Moreover, what the texts regard as worth saving of Confucianism are not values manifested in history, but ideals imagined and lived by a single sage (Confucius) or by a handful of individuals who directly intuited transhistorical values autonomously and in isolation from tradition. This entails that in and of themselves, Confucian values are not strictly speaking “traditional,” given that they were never transmitted from one generation to the next. What *was* transmitted, however, are a number of canonical texts believed to encompass, in a hidden form, the transhistorical values of the sage(s) (and worthies). In sum, not only are traditions-as-history valueless in the texts’ envisioning of emancipatory processes—they are portrayed as limitations in both cases—but tradition-as-value (their Confucianism) can be construed as a tradition in its own right, according to the discourse of the texts, only insofar as one speaks of the canonical texts that were transmitted

through history. Apart from a limited number of canonical works, in short, the entirety of tradition is of no value.

In terms of their discursive form—of the methods of textual authorization they employ—both texts sanction their version of Confucianism by appealing to the authority of tradition. This is achieved through a complex hermeneutical process that ties the canon with its modern interpreter. To better understand this process, one must keep in mind that strictly speaking, it is not the canonical texts themselves that are valuable, but the transhistorical values conveyed in them. The *New Treatise* and *Eastern and Western Cultures* do not share with the Qing tradition of *kaojuxue* (考據學) a concern with providing a philologically accurate account of the classics, and they show no interest in what the commentarial tradition has to say about the canon. One of the most important assumptions underscoring the texts' hermeneutics lies in the implicit claim that insofar as they have directly intuited transhistorical truths, the texts' authors can comprehend the classics without the help of the commentarial or philological traditions. Since implied in this discourse is the idea that Liang and Xiong have already apprehended the transhistorical truths lodged in the canon, the latter remains of value, within this hermeneutical model, only inasmuch as it provides a means to buttress the texts' claim to have access to the transhistorical by demonstrating that their authors' vision of emancipation is one and the same as that of the sages of old.

This hermeneutical model recognizes the authority of tradition-as-value only to then allow for its subsumption by the modern interpreter. Both texts present themselves as the very pinnacle of the Confucian tradition: as the locale in which tradition is made available to readers in its entirety, repackaged in a modern format that is clearer, more systematic, and more accessible than that of the classics. Given that Confucian iconoclasm sees value in canonical texts only insofar as transhistorical values discovered by former sages are encoded in them, once such values have been successfully decoded by the modern interpreters and explained to their contemporaries in a language that is more readily accessible to them, the significance and worth of the classics are, if not entirely lost, at least considerably reduced. After all, why read the classics if their message has been made clearer and more systematic in *Eastern and Western Cultures* and the *New Treatise*? What takes place, in this hermeneutical model, is a process whereby the modern text substitutes itself for the entirety of tradition-as-value, replacing the latter with a fetishized version of it that is made available to readers in its totality.

In sum, both at the levels of the discursive form and content of the texts, Confucianism is reshaped into an “iconoclastic tradition.” By this, I do not mean, of course, that Liang and Xiong were engaged in, or called for, the destruction of idols in religious temples—although, remarkably enough, in his youth Xiong did go around in the nude (as he himself later recalled) smashing statues in Buddhist and Daoist temples, a practice he gave up in his adult age.⁶⁶ Nor do I mean by it that iconoclasm was the main *intention* behind the writing of the *New Treatise* and *Eastern and Western Cultures*. It is entirely possible that Xiong and Liang saw themselves as “preservers” of the past; not of an indiscriminate past, of course, but one that was carefully curated by the authors to serve their purposes. By calling the texts “iconoclastic,” I am referring not to the intentions of their authors, but to the *consequences* of the texts’ discourse on tradition and of the manner in which they authorize this discourse by equating it with the message of past sages. My use of the term “iconoclastic,” in short, denotes a *textual* form of iconoclasm.⁶⁷

To sum up, I refer to the Confucianism of the texts as “iconoclastic” and as an “antitradition” insofar as it is (1) a tradition that is presented as the only one capable of bringing about a thorough emancipation of the individual and community from the hold of the past, (2) a tradition that rejects the authority of historical traditions and of traditional values except for those expressed in a narrowly defined canon, and (3) a tradition that is, *at least in theory*,⁶⁸ ultimately iconoclastic even vis-à-vis itself—that is, vis-à-vis the tradition-as-value it rescues from the dustbin of history—insofar as its value is mediated by the modern texts in a manner that significantly de-authorizes the previous sources of tradition-as-value. Confucian iconoclasm represents what I would call an “ouroboric tradition”: a tradition that births itself by killing itself, by subsuming itself, in its entirety, into a single object—a text—that, in and of itself, cannot be properly called a “tradition” in its own right.⁶⁹ (Or, more properly speaking, the texts cannot be seen as part of a “tradition” if one provides them with the social recognition they seek: the recognition that they are the products of authors no longer defined by their socio-temporal situatedness.)

The ouroboric dimension of Confucian iconoclasm effectively echoes Alan Cole’s analysis of the ways various religious narratives, both Buddhist and Christian, attempt to fetishize and subsume the truth of tradition, only to then offer it to readers, provided they perform a leap of faith legitimizing the texts’ claim to fully represent tradition. Cole describes this process as requiring “three mutually reliant zones”:

1) a deep origin of truth in the form of a past sage, saint, deity, or Being; 2) a means for moving that truth forward in time, be it through memory, texts, ritual practices, relics, or the regular reincarnation of the primal source in some contemporary form or body; 3) a contemporary spokesperson for that primordial truth who is sanctioned to represent it in the present, interpret it, and distribute it to a believing public, who delegate to him just this power and legitimacy.⁷⁰

Without entering the complex debate on whether (modern) Confucianism is a religion, suffice it to say, for the present purpose, that the manner in which textual authority is constituted in Confucian iconoclasm does indeed follow the model proposed by Cole. It does so insofar as it posits an ultimate source of authority in the past which is then subsumed by the author and his text thanks to the former's alleged access to transhistorical truths that are one and the same as those achieved by the sages of the past.

Historical antitraditions

Confucian iconoclasm's discourse on the past is thoroughly modern, insofar as it construes the relation between the contemporary and the ancients as one of *emulation* rather than *transmission*. The texts emulate the ability to directly access the transhistorical that characterizes the genius of those individuals standing at the fountainhead of tradition.⁷¹ Yet as in the case of the antitradition of modernity, one must be careful not to reproduce the language of the actors when describing Confucian iconoclasm. It is crucial that we treat the texts' self-portrayal, according to which they are the product of authors no longer bound by time and space, as a central component of the historical phenomenon of Confucian iconoclasm, and not as an accurate description of it.

By taking a step back from the texts' self-portrayal, we can come to see that although the discursive content and form of the texts are thoroughly iconoclastic in their implications, we, as researchers, can nevertheless describe them as traditional, insofar as they draw discursive tropes from a wealth of historical resources. This includes, among others, discursive resources inherited from historical Confucianisms. Even if one allows that historical Confucianisms tended to betray traditionalist inclinations, one must be careful to distinguish between *continuous* traditionalism, leaning toward the