CHAPTER 1

Mou Zongsan’s Interpretation of Confucianism
Some Hermeneutical Reflections

Mou Zongsan 卞宗三 (1909–1995) played a significant role in the development of “Contemporary New Confucianism.” This chapter narrows his role more specifically and hermeneutically reflects on his interpretation of Confucianism, which is characterized by the influence of Western philosophy, especially that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his interpretation, Mou employs not only Kant’s philosophical terminology such as “thing-in-itself,” “intellectual intuition,” and “autonomy,” but also his philosophical framework of “appearance” and “thing-in-itself.” Mou even views this framework as the common model for all philosophical thinking. His interpretation of Confucianism, however, has encountered criticisms on two fronts. On one hand, he has been reproached for distorting Kant’s “original” philosophy, and, on the other hand, he has been criticized for reading too much Kant into Confucianism.

Mou’s Interpretation of Confucianism

As a reaction to the challenge of Western culture, “Contemporary New Confucianism” arose in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. In view of the variety of its contents and directions, it should be regarded more as an intellectual movement than as a school. The initiators of this movement primarily include Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) and Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968), with Zhang Junmai, Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan, Mou Zongsan, and perhaps Qian Mu 钱穆 (1895–1990) as their followers.1 Characteristic of this movement is its attempt to integrate some ingredients of Western culture
with the Confucian tradition, insofar as these ingredients can facilitate China’s modernization and promote the further development of Chinese culture. This attempt is often based on the philosophical reconstruction of the Chinese tradition in terms of Western ideas. The efforts of the New Confucians are similar in many ways to those of the Fathers of the Church in developing early Christian theology. In this respect, Mou Zongsan deserves special attention for his philosophical achievements; an analysis of Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism and the hermeneutical problems involved in his reconstruction of Confucian philosophy are of special cultural significance and philosophical purport.

Mou’s reconstruction of Confucianism is characterized by his appropriation of Kant’s philosophical framework and concepts, and is one of the earliest instances of what has come to be known in the West as comparative philosophy—however, instead of moving from the West to the East, the intellectual movement here is from China to the West.² Strictly speaking, Mou may be considered unqualified to be a Kant specialist because of his lack of acquaintance with the German language. Nevertheless, as occasionally is the case, this disadvantage is offset by his genius for philosophical thinking and his diligence in researching—sometimes a “disadvantage” can be transformed into its opposite. On the basis of English versions, he translated Kant’s three Critiques and Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten into Chinese. To these Chinese versions he appended his commentaries, which are not only philological but also philosophical-interpretative. He often interprets Kant’s philosophy by contrasting it with Chinese philosophy, especially with Confucian philosophy.

Kant’s influence on Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism can best be considered from two perspectives: the framework of philosophical thinking and moral philosophy. In the first place, Mou appropriated Kant’s philosophical framework of “appearance” and “thing-in-itself.” For Mou this framework can serve as the common model for all philosophical thinking. In 1975 he published Appearance and Thing-in-Itself (Xianxiang yu wuzishen 現象與物自身), where he thoroughly discussed Kant’s distinction. In this book, he interpreted Kant’s concept of “thing-in-itself” not as a usual epistemological concept but as one with value-connotation. He did so even though he realized Kant had never clearly expressed this thought. In this regard, Mou shows his Confucian (and New Confucian) roots. In Mou’s view, an epistemological concept of “thing-in-itself” is not sufficient to support Kant’s transcendental distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself since the “thing-in-itself” in this sense lies always beyond human knowledge. In order to solve this problem, Mou appealed to the thesis that human beings are indeed finite but have access to the infinite, which is a common conviction of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. As revealed in his Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy (Zhide zhijue yu Zhongguo...
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zhexue 智的直覺與中國哲學) (1971), he found this access in the “intellectual intuition” of human beings.

It is generally known that Kant ascribes intellectual intuition only to God. But on a full analysis of the relevant sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Mou came to the conclusion that Kant’s philosophical system logically implies the possibility of ascribing intellectual intuition also to humans, although it is contrary to Kant’s own expressions. This is a viewpoint Johann G. Fichte (1762–1814) also advocated. It is here that Mou found a key to the comparison between Kantian and Chinese philosophy. Therefore a “transcendent” or “noumenal” metaphysics, which is impossible for Kant, is possible for Chinese philosophy. In such a metaphysical structure Mou found the proper place for Confucian metaphysics. According to Mou, Confucian metaphysics is founded on liangzhi 良知 (original knowing) or benxin 本心 (original mind), which is a type of intellectual intuition of the moral and therefore free subject. In this sense, the “thing-in-itself” has a practical connotation, because it is a horizon that discloses itself through liangzhi. So Mou views Confucian metaphysics as a “moral metaphysics,” which is different from Kant’s “metaphysics of morals” inasmuch as the latter means a metaphysical (a priori) explanation of morals.

This point brings us to the second perspective of moral philosophy. In the introduction to his epoch-making work *Heart-Mind as Reality and Human Nature as Reality* (Xinti yu xingti 心體與性體), Mou critically examined Kant’s system of moral philosophy. Mou agreed with Kant’s view that the essence of morality lies in the “autonomy” of the moral subject (will). In the concept of “autonomy,” Mou found the key not only to interpret the doctrines of Confucianism, but also to classify the systems within Confucianism. At the same time, however, he curiously pointed out that the whole meaning of Kant’s insight in this respect cannot be fully developed within the framework of his own moral philosophy. The reason for this is that Kant presupposes a dualist standpoint between the rational and the emotional deportment in the moral agent. Kant’s strict separation of the rational from the emotional means the moral subject can function only as a *principium dijudications* (the principle of the appraisal of the action) and not at the same time as a *principium executionis* (the principle of its performance). In other words, the moral subject in Kant lacks the power of self-realization, which means there is a narrowing of the “autonomy” of the moral subject as its moral self-legislation. For Mou, it is because of this narrowing and the deprivation of intellectual intuition in humans that Kant is not in a position to establish a moral metaphysics. In its place Mou saw the prototype of moral metaphysics in Confucianism.

Thus, in Mencius’ theory of xin 心 (heart-mind) as moral subject, Mou found a more suitable philosophical-anthropological framework for Kant’s concept of “autonomy” because this theory is based on an a priori universalism
as well as a unity of the rational and the emotional. On the basis of Mencius’ philosophical anthropology, Wang Yangming advanced the thesis of the unity of moral subject and moral law (xin ji li 心即理) as well as that of the unity of moral knowledge and action (zhi xing he yi 知行合一). The first of these theses means that liangzhi as moral subject is the last resort for moral legislation, whereas the second means that liangzhi functions not only as the principium dijudicationis, but also as the principium executionis of the moral good.

In both characteristics of Mencius’ moral philosophy—that is, the ethics of autonomy and the philosophical-anthropological unity of the rational and the emotional—Mou finds the criteria for the grouping of different systems within Confucianism. In his classification, he identifies Confucius, Mencius, the author(s) of the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong 中庸), and the commentators of the Book of Changes (Yijing 易經) in the mainstream of pre-Qin Confucianism. Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 298–238 BCE) is then considered as a representative of another stream of Confucianism because he established an ethics of heteronomy. For the same reason, Mou excluded the Han Confucians from the mainstream of Confucianism because they appealed to what Kant called “theological ethics,” which made their ethics heteronomous in nature.

In his Heart-Mind as Reality and Human Nature as Reality and From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan (Cong Lu Xiangshan dao Liu Jishan 從陸象山到劉蕺山) (1979), Mou propounds a new classification of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucians. In his opinion, the early Northern Song dynasty Confucians, such as Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), belong to the aforementioned mainstream. Here we see something novel compared to the traditional view, since the thought of Cheng Hao and his brother Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) formerly were not distinguished from each other. According to Mou, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism developed into three systems: (1) that of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming, (2) that of Hu Hong 胡宏 (1106–1161) and Liu Jishan 劉蕺山 (1578–1645), and (3) that of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. The first two systems lead to a moral philosophy that is founded on the autonomy of the moral subject. The difference between them consists only in their approaches. The first system starts subjectively from a philosophical-anthropological thesis on the human heart-mind, whereas the second one starts objectively from ontological assertions about Tian 天 (Heaven). In any event, Mou regards these systems together in the mainstream of Confucianism. In contrast, the third system is excluded from the mainstream, although through his comprehensive philosophical system, Zhu Xi has exerted tremendous influence on the subsequent development of Confucianism. The reason for this lies in Mou’s judgment that this system is essentially intellectualistic and therefore based on the heteronomy of the moral subject.
Mou and His Critics

In the Chinese-speaking community, Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism, as mentioned above, encounters dual criticisms for simultaneously distorting Kant’s “original” philosophy and reading too much Kant into Confucianism. An example of the former criticism is that of Kuang Zhiren 鄺芷人, who criticizes Mou for interpreting Kant’s concept of “thing-in-itself” as one with value-connotation.3 The criticism of Huang Jinxing is of the latter type; he questions whether it is appropriate to introduce the concept of “autonomy” into the interpretation of Confucianism.4 In addition, some scholars doubt the suitableness of ascribing Zhu Xi’s ethics as heteronomous.5 Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism seemingly also fails to cope with the criticism from the so-called neoprimitive or contextualistic discourse of such scholars as Herbert Fingarette, Roger T. Ames, Henry Rosemont, Jr., Randall P. Perenboom, and others, who emphasize the particularity of Chinese philosophy and avoid, as much as they can, using Western philosophical concepts or categories in their interpretations of it.6

None of the above critics has given a methodological reflection on Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism, but one can be found in Feng Yaoming’s 馮耀明 article in Chinese “Conceptual Relativism and Chinese Philosophy.” On the basis of W. V. Quine’s relevant theories, Feng advances a so-called conceptual relativism that includes the following points: 7 (1) Every conceptual scheme is a subjective device, which is able to describe and interpret the objectively real but has no necessary relation to it. This can be called “internal relativity.” (2) In every conceptual scheme, the meaning of concepts, the truth of sentences, and the affirmation of beliefs are relative to the presumption of this scheme. This can be called “external relativity.” (3) Because of the double relativity, different concepts that belong to different conceptual schemes or theoretical systems are unintertranslatable, and hence the nexuses of beliefs to which these concepts belong are incommensurable. (4) Therefore, no conceptual scheme has absolute and ultimate superiority in its function of justification, and there is no criterion that is independent of all conceptual schemes and hence theoretically neutral. (5) The objectively real that the conceptual relativism presupposes is not the given actual but a regulative concept, such as Kant’s thing-in-itself. (6) Conceptual relativism is different from irrationalism, subjectivism, skepticism, and pluralism, because it presupposes the objectively real and admits a relative superiority between different conceptual schemes in regard to their function of describing and interpreting the objectively real. (7) As a methodology, conceptual relativism rejects any direct conceptual transplantation or appropriation but admits absorption or transformation between conceptual schemes that have similar theoretical traits.

According to his “conceptual relativism,” Feng then makes a quantitative
comparison between the metaphysical frameworks of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Buddhism, and Confucianism in terms of ten theoretical traits: immanence, participation, transcendence, subjectivity, immutability, objective reality, subject-object duality, contrast of reality, value-connotation, and metaphysical preexistence. In light of the comparison, Feng argues that it is Plato’s metaphysical system rather than Kant’s that is the closest to Confucianism. From this he concludes: “It is the burden for both sides either to adopt or integrate the epistemological connotations of Kant’s concept of ‘thing-in-itself’ into any system of Chinese philosophy or to adopt or integrate the philosophical-anthropological implications of the concept  вещен物 [thing] included in any system of Chinese philosophy into Kant’s critical philosophy.” Needless to say, this criticism is leveled at Mou’s interpretation of Chinese philosophy.

It is unnecessary to discuss the relation of Feng’s “conceptual relativism” to Quine’s, but Donald Davidson’s criticism of conceptual relativism is worth discussing in this context, for it is relevant to our concerns. According to Davidson, the incommensurability between different conceptual schemes implies the unintertranslatability between different languages that can transmit these schemes, granted that every conceptual scheme must be transmitted by some language. However, the unintertranslatability between different languages means either complete or partial failure of translatability. Davidson demonstrates convincingly that we cannot make sense of the claim of complete failure, so the only possibility is the case of partial failure. Here it is not necessary to go any further into the details of Davidson’s argument. For our present purpose it will suffice simply to provide a quote:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability. What we need, it seems to me, is some idea of the considerations that set the limits to conceptual contrast. There are extreme suppositions that founder on paradox or contradiction; there are modest examples we have no trouble understanding.

In brief, the claim of total unintertranslatability between differing conceptual schemes must presuppose a common coordinate system independent of them; otherwise, we shall lack a common foundation for the comparison between them. But this amounts to negation of the point we want to defend.

Now, if we return to Feng’s idea of “conceptual relativism,” according to his fifth and sixth points, he seems to presuppose a common coordinate system, namely, the objectively real, even when he stresses the unintertranslatability.
ity between different conceptual schemes. In light of Davidson’s theory, we are warranted to suppose that by “unintertranslatability” Feng means here only partial failure of translatability, as his seventh point suggests. Therefore, the distance of Feng’s standpoint from Davidson’s is not as great as one may think. When we apply Feng’s conceptual relativism to the intertranslation of differing philosophical systems such as the Confucian and the Kantian, it amounts to no more than a trivial truth that in two philosophical systems we cannot find two totally corresponding concepts, because at the very least they do not have exactly the same position and meaning within their own systems. That is to say, in employing a concept in one system to interpret a concept in another system, we are always doing it analogically, and therefore some conceptual adjustments become inevitable. Even in ordinary conversations we are used to making such adjustments either consciously or unconsciously. This is why we can communicate with each other by means of the same concepts although we have different nexuses of beliefs. So it seems that Feng’s “conceptual relativism” is more rhetorical than substantial.

In addition, Feng’s “conceptual relativism” as a methodology of philosophical interpretation cannot offer any clear criteria for determining between which concepts there are similarities in their theoretical traits that allow a meaningful conceptual absorption or transformation. With regard to the ten theoretical traits that Feng uses for comparison, we may ask, “Why just these ten?” And in reference to the comparison between Confucian and Kantian systems, we may also ask, “Why not compare their ethical frameworks instead of their metaphysical ones?” It is obvious that in the ethical sphere there are more similarities between Confucian and Kantian philosophies.

Moreover, the least persuasive point in Feng’s “conceptual relativism” lies in the fact that it totally neglects the hermeneutical dimension of philosophical interpretation. Because of this neglect he hastily concludes that Kant’s philosophical framework of appearance and thing-in-itself has “no value-connotations” when he compares it with other philosophical frameworks. As we have seen, Mou interprets Kant’s concept of “thing-in-itself” not as an epistemological concept, but as one with value-connexion. If this interpretation is correct, Feng might wish to give up or at least revise his view on Mou’s philosophical interpretation. As I have indicated elsewhere:

The concept of “thing-in-itself” in Kant’s philosophy has a double meaning. In its epistemological context, it is, as generally understood, a factual concept; in its ethical context, it reveals some kind of value-connexion. In terms of Kant’s assertion of the primacy of practical to speculative reason, we are oriented to say that the latter, that is, the ethical interpretation, is the real implication of this very concept.
On the face of it, Mou’s interpretation of “thing-in-itself” seems contrary to Kant’s own expositions, especially to those in the First Critique. Apparently Mou’s approach presupposes Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher’s (1768–1834) hermeneutical motto that “we understand the writer better than he himself did.” As Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) shrewdly sees, the whole history of modern hermeneutics shows itself in the changing interpretation of this statement, which embraces the proper problem of hermeneutics. In order to do justice to Mou’s interpretation of Confucianism, it is necessary to go further into his hermeneutical views.

**Mou’s Hermeneutical Views**

Mou never articulated a system of philosophical hermeneutics. None of his works has devoted special attention to the problems of modern hermeneutics. Yet his prefaces to his books *Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy* and *Appearance and Thing-in-Itself* and his lectures titled “The Text-Interpretative Approach for the Study of Chinese Philosophy” and “Objective Understanding and Rebuilding of Chinese Philosophy” reveal his hermeneutical views. Mou does not draw a sharp distinction between “interpretation” and “understanding.” His hermeneutical view seems to run parallel with Gadamer’s dictum that “all understanding is interpretation.”

In his preface to *Appearance and Thing-in-Itself*, Mou attempts to justify his interpretation of Chinese philosophy. On one hand, he appeals to the Buddhist hermeneutical principle of the Four Refuges:

- Rely on the spirit, not the letter.
- Rely on the teaching, not the teacher.
- Rely on direct knowledge, not discursive consciousness.
- Rely on the definitive meaning, not the provisional meaning.

On the other hand, Mou resorts to Kant’s distinction between “rational” and “historical” knowledge in the First Critique. As Mou writes:

In interpreting texts three things should be avoided: superficiality, out-of-context interpretation, and one-sided comparison. One has to comprehend the text thoroughly, while suspending the incomprehensible. In this way the fundamental meanings of texts will reveal themselves. Then, one has to determine further the levels and scopes of the meanings. That is to say, one has to make clear the differences and similarities of the meanings. “Difference” means demarcation between meanings. “Similarity” means convergence of various meanings. Once this becomes clear,
one may comprehend the meanings of texts through one’s own reason, as if they came from one’s own mouth. It begins with comprehending the meanings on the basis of the “letter” and ends with “rely on the spirit, not the letter.” The reasons for “not relying on the letter” lie in avoiding literalism. Literalism achieves only what Kant terms as “historical,” not “rational” knowledge. The beginners and those who are confined by their own schools are inclined to fall into this trap. Only those who are skilled in the text-interpretative method become able to “rely on the spirit, not the letter.”…All grand systems of thought are objective rational systems, which are crystallizations of the wisdom of the sages. When we understand the sages’ wisdom through the texts, our lives are to be exalted to the level of reason through their words. How can one speak of “relying on the spirit, not the letter,” if one’s life is not moved by objective truths? Is he really relying on the spirit? At this moment, it is better to start from the very beginning. Such a beginning method has to be concrete, actual, and precise. It unites gradually the variety of meanings into reason as their ultimate criterion. It is through the lack of practicable methods that one falsely speaks of the differences and similarities between the meanings due to literalism or arbitrarily plays with words or unites the meanings by making their demarcations blurred. For those who are skilled in the text-interpretative method, the rational is simultaneously the historical.19

The above quotation covers almost all important problems of modern hermeneutics. It contains at least three points: (1) Understanding or interpretation has its “objectivity,” and only at the level of reason can it reach “objectivity.” (2) It must be through the subjective “life” that understanding or interpretation can reach its “objectivity.” (3) Understanding or interpretation covers two levels, namely, the semantic and the philosophical, which correspond respectively to Kant’s “historical” and “rational” knowledge. But the former level is subordinate to the latter.

If we put these points into the context of modern hermeneutics, their meanings will become clearer. In the development of modern hermeneutics, there are two divergent, although not completely opposite, lines. One line was founded by F. E. D. Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and the other was initiated by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), then developed into a methodology by Gadamer. The first stresses the autonomy of the object of interpretation and argues strongly for the objectivity of interpretation. The second line starts from the historicity of understanding and disputes all interpretative standpoints outside of history, and hence questions the possibility of “objectively valid interpretation.” The controversy between these two lines has culminated in the dispute between Gadamer and Emilio Betti (1890–1968), who argued for the reconstruction of authorial intention.
In light of Mou's first point, his hermeneutical principle may belong to the line of Schleiermacher because Mou grants the possibility of “objectively valid interpretation.” For Mou the object of philosophical interpretation is not the texts as such, but their meanings, which are comprehensible only through reason. So the term “objective” for him means “conforming to reason” rather than “corresponding to the original meanings of texts”—his motto for the interpretation of philosophical texts would be that “one has to interpret the texts as reasonably as possible.” Therefore, we must suppose that reasonable interpretations correspond to the “original” meanings of texts more than unreasonable ones. An “objective” understanding or interpretation presupposes the ability to use reason for thinking. Even when we want to prove that the thoughts revealed in some texts contain logical contradictions, we can resort only to reason. This seems to be implied in Bertrand Russell's remark about the reports of Xenophon and Plato on Socrates: “A stupid man’s report of what a clever man says is never accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something that he can understand. I would rather be reported by my bitterest enemy among philosophers than by a friend innocent of philosophy.”

Regarding the validity of philosophical interpretation, Mou rejects a relativistic standpoint insofar as he does not deny the possibility of achieving an interpretation corresponding to the original meanings of texts. Nevertheless, he does not take an objectivistic standpoint because he finds the criteria for determining the original meanings not in the texts as such, but in our own reason.

Mou's second point also reveals his distance from objectivism, because he views the responsiveness of life as another precondition for a valid interpretation. This reminds us of Dilthey's hermeneutics for the reason that he sees the guarantee of an objectively valid interpretation not in abstract reason, but in what he terms “objective spirit,” namely, in “the manifold forms in which the community existing between individuals has objectified itself in the sensible world.” In other words, the “objective spirit” is the embodiment of human nature in culture, which in Dilthey’s system is inseparable from the concept of “life.” Likewise, for Mou, our reason cannot embody itself without life. In this sense, human reason is “experiential.” Therefore, Mou defines Confucianism as a “learning of life” (shengming de xuewen 生命的學問). For him the concept of “life” covers both the spiritual activities of individuals and the institutional activities of communities such as politics, economy, law, and so forth. Mou also points out that objective understanding requires not only the faculty of understanding, but also a “responsive life and temperament.”

Mou's third point refers to Kant's distinction between “rational” and “historical” knowledge. Kant defines these two kinds of knowledge in this way: “Historical knowledge is cognitio ex datis [knowledge from facts]; rational
knowledge is *cognitio ex principiis* [knowledge from principles].” Whether a kind of knowledge is historical or rational does not depend on its content but on the way in which to acquire it. In brief the knowledge that one obtains through one’s own rational thinking is “rational.” But the same knowledge would be “historical” if one were to take it only as data and did not exalt it to the level of rational thinking. Since the latter kind of knowledge is dead, Kant compares it to a “plaster cast of a living man.” For Kant, philosophical interpretation should not remain at the level of “historical knowledge” but must be exalted to the level of “rational knowledge.”

In an article published in 1790, Kant replied to criticism from Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809), who claimed that Leibniz’ philosophy had already contained a critique of reason even more comprehensive than that of Kant. At the end of this article, Kant writes:

> Thus the *Critique of Pure Reason* may well be the real apology for Leibniz, even in opposition to his followers who exalt him with words of praise that hardly do him honor. It can also be an apology for many older philosophers who speak the purest nonsense through certain historians of philosophy, for all the praises the latter bestow. They do not comprehend the intention of these philosophers when they neglect the key to all explications of the works of pure reason through concepts alone, namely, the critique of reason itself (as the common source of all concepts), and are incapable of looking beyond the literal meaning of what these philosophers have said to what they intended to say.

Evidently, “works of pure reason through concepts alone” refers to what Kant terms “rational knowledge.” And the distinction between what a philosopher has said and what he intended to say corresponds to the difference between “historical” and “rational” knowledge. Philosophical interpretation should begin with the literal meanings of texts and then be required to go further into the level of “rational knowledge.” As soon as it reaches that level, the interpreter may determine the “original” meanings of texts according to his or her own reason, even in opposition to their literal meanings. This is what modern hermeneutics terms as the “hermeneutical circle.” So it is no accident that Heidegger appeals to the quotation above when he defends his interpretation of Kant’s first *Critique.*

In his lecture “The Text-Interpretative Approach for the Study of Chinese Philosophy,” Mou stresses the necessity of the “text-interpretative approach” (*wenxian tujing* 文獻途徑). But in the study of Western philosophy, we discover this does not apply because Western philosophy is more systematic and the concepts it employs are more distinct. Because the majority of Chinese philosophi-
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cal texts were not systematically written, modern researchers have had to start from reading the texts, and the “text-interpretative approach” becomes critical. This is why, in his works such as Heart-Mind as Reality and Human Nature as Reality, From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan, Talent and Xuan-Principles (Cai-xing yu xuanli 才性與玄理) (1963), Buddhata and Prajna (Foxing yu bore 佛性與般若) (1977), and On the Highest Good (Yuanshan lun 圓善論) (1985), Mou explicated a great many relevant texts. For him, the “text-interpretative approach” is not identical with a historical or philological approach. He criticizes the philologists of the Qing dynasty for adopting a lopsided hermeneutical principle where philosophical implications can be disclosed only after the clarification of philological issues (Xungu ming erhou yili ming 訓詁明而後義理明). In modern terms, the fault of the latter approach lies in the neglect of the “hermeneutical circle.” On the contrary, Mou’s “text-interpretative approach” is founded on the circular interactions between philological commentary and philosophical exposition.

Unlike the above-mentioned Western philosophers, Mou himself never built up a philosophical hermeneutics. Yet some of Mou's hermeneutical principles can be drawn on the basis of the foregoing discussions. In brief, he distinguishes between two levels of philosophical interpretation: the philological and the philosophical. At the former level, an interpreter must “comprehend the meaning on the basis of the letter.” Mou never neglected the methodological meaning of this level, insofar as he translated Kant’s main works and explicated the basic texts of Chinese philosophy. At the second level of philosophical interpretation, Mou warns us that one must “rely on the spirit, not the letter.” Mou’s philosophical creativity can best be sensed in this regard.

In his book Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy, he defends his interpretation of Chinese philosophy:

One may say, your so doing amounts to forcing Kant into the Chinese philosophical tradition. Kant may not wish this, and he may even dislike your tradition. I say, what is rational has its necessary consequences whether you like it or not. Kant may like to know the Chinese tradition since he gave special attention to morality and also was good at discussing morality. You think that Kant may not like the Chinese tradition because you do not understand the proper, real, and profound meanings of this tradition. As long as the proper, real, and profound meanings of the Chinese tradition can be disclosed, I believe it is still Kant who really understands Chinese Confucianism.29

Just as Kant and Heidegger, Mou claims at the second level of philosophical interpretation that he understands the author better than the author did him-
self. If someone questions him at this level regarding whether his interpretation corresponds to the original meanings of texts, it reveals only the former’s ignorance of philosophical thinking as well as the principles and problems of hermeneutics. It may be argued that the criteria for distinguishing a creative interpretation from a distorted one lie in nothing else but the philosopher’s creativity. In this sense and to that extent, it seems safe to defend Mou’s philosophical interpretation of Confucianism, especially in spirit, and not by the letter.