

Three "Problems" to Be Overcome in the Revival of Confucianism*

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Abstract—Confucianism is both incompatible with and adaptable to the life of modern society. Believe it or not, Confucianism is impossible to "disappear" in world culture including Northeast Asian culture. At the same time, it is necessary but also difficult to make a rational positioning for Confucianism as the times are always in a dynamic process and the interpretation of Confucianism is also in the process of constant development.

Keywords—Confucianism; epochal character; vitality

I. INTRODUCTION

How to understand "the revival of Confucianism" is the most core problem in the positioning of Confucianism in modern society. Ji Xianlin once said, "Every dog has its day". He once predicted that the 21st century is the times when the "days" of western culture will make place for the "days" of eastern culture, eastern culture will take the leading position and this trend is the objective law independent of man's will.¹ This is his hope and expectation to the eastern culture. Meanwhile, as Du Weiming said, "There is no tradition in the world, like Confucian culture which has gone through such a process of being completely negated." This saying presented the difficulty and hardship in the revival of Confucianism from another aspect. Nevertheless, it can be seen that they both pointed out the goal and direction of the development of Confucianism. On the premise of the necessity and possibility of the "revival of Confucianism", this paper discusses the three problems to be overcome in the process of "revival of Confucianism".

II. OVERCOMING THE NON-EPOCHAL ELEMENT OF CONFUCIANISM

For a rather long period of time, "epochal character" once was a basic criterion for the academic circles to appraise the merits and demerits of a thinker, ideology, and even the whole "Confucianism" in the Confucian tradition. The

tradition of Confucianism is above criticism. However, "revival of Confucianism" is not to reproduce the whole part of Confucianism, but highlight the modern elements of Confucianism that can promote social development. In fact, as an important theory and concept "ruling" the feudal society for more than 2,000 years of history, Confucianism cannot be completely suitable for modern society, because many value norms of traditional Confucian connotation are contrary to, at least not completely match with modernization concepts. For example, the value of the supremacy of monarchy and the patriarchal supremacy led to a common sense of official position and a strong worship political state of mind to the authority; In the "the Three Cardinal Guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) and Five Constant Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge and sincerity)", the "Five Constant Virtues" are somewhat in line with the requirements of modern society, while the "Three Cardinal Guides" have little value to draw upon. Moreover, as a long-standing traditional concept culture system, Confucianism contains many "cultural paradoxes", from which it can not only reveal the elements and characteristics of humanism but also discover many non-humanistic and even anti-humanistic cultural characteristics. The humanistic and non-humanistic characteristics of Confucianism had posed positive and negative effects to the overall development of human beings.² Scholars generally believe that Chinese culture lacks the spirit of competition and innovation and more lacks the spirit of subversion. Therefore, it is neither advocated to directly explore the so-called modernization factors from Chinese traditional culture, nor believed that promoting the revival of Confucianism is a reasonable idea. Some scholars believe that Confucianism is the "product of the feudal age" so that Confucianism will certainly lead to the result contrary to the modern spirit. In another words, most of those scholars believe that Confucianism lacks the elements of modernity and thus denies the modern value of Confucianism. From the perspective of the emergence and characteristics of

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¹ Jiang Linxiang. Tradition and Modernization of Confucian Value [M]. Jinan: Shandong Qilu Press, 2002, p.140. (in Chinese)

² Tu Keguo. On the Paradox of Humanism and Anti-humanism in Confucianism and Human's Full Development [J]. Journal of Shandong University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences), 2004 (12), p. 43. (in Chinese)

modernization, Confucianism indeed cannot directly lead to modernization. This is because Confucianism is an ideological system with a strong, historical and retro style. Moreover, judging from some of its ideological connotations, there are indeed many factors that are incompatible with modernization. However, it is not intelligent to completely negate the fine national cultural characteristics remained over 2,500 years of history just because of the non-modern elements of Confucianism, but realize the major role of Confucianism played in maintaining the social order and promoting sound development of the society and other aspects. Therefore, in the process of "revival of Confucianism", first it is necessary to absolutely overcome the non-modern elements of Confucianism and fully explore the modern elements of Confucianism to serve the modern society. In nature, Confucianism is not an unchangeable cultural base of the feudal society or traditional society, because Confucianism has its own volatility and flexibility. The reason why Confucianism can have a strong vitality is that Confucianism always insists on maintaining the traditional culture and constantly absorbs the ideas of other schools to enrich it, surely including the contemporary "modernity." The emphasizing on overcoming non-modernity is not to deny the traditional nature, because traditional nature often means national nature and the time and national natures together constitute the two basic attributes of culture. Some scholars point out that "tradition" and "modern" are not two binary opposite unchanged modes of thinking, but have more dialectical connection between them. The once mutually closed and opposite state between traditional ideological resources and modern ideological resources has been changed into a mutually "opening" state. In the benign interaction between them, on the one hand, the modern ideological resources is truly engaged with and rooted in the cultural tradition of China by impacting and stimulating the tradition to establish a spirit driving source deep in the tradition of China for modern development of Chinese culture; on the other hand, modern ideology is interpreted from the perspective of cultural tradition of China and the meaning and problem of modern spirit is further made clear by getting the unique wisdom of Chinese nation including Confucianism incorporated into modern ideological resources.

III. OVERCOMING THE ABSOLUTIZATION OF THE "POLITICAL VALUE STRUCTURE" OF CONFUCIANISM

There are various views about the "nature" of Confucianism. It is believed that Confucianism has both a strong "ethical" nature and rich "political" nature. Some scholars believe that it is difficult to achieve an all-round revival of Confucianism in the process of modernization in contemporary China. This is because Chinese traditional Confucianism is political in nature. And its core political values are the supremacy of emperors, male elders' power and principles of morals. So the destiny of traditional culture is to fit the existence and the maintenance and development of the monarchic politics. They believe that the values and standards in traditional Confucianism are contradictory to modern ideal. The continuity of Confucianism between the pre-Qin and Han dynasty places those who hope or initiate a

revival or upgrading of Confucianism to promote social transformation in China in an awkward situation.³ As a political concept of the patriarchal farming society, Confucianism puts forward the rational principle of benefiting the people on the one hand and inherits the traditional monarchy system on the other hand. It gives the monarchy the power to benefit the people, so that the political subjectivity of people is lost and the realistic political character of Confucianism is changed constantly. The loss of political subjects has caused Confucianism to succumb to politics and lose vitality. At the same time, a crisis of identity with Confucianism is also triggered because of the instability of monarchy. However, the political purpose of Confucianism for the benefit of the people determines that Confucianism can introspect and get out of the crisis, and then Confucianism was once again used by the new rulers.⁴ Confucianism was just used as a tool to consolidate the monarchy system although Confucianism devotes particular care to paying attention to people, care of people, benefit of people and people-oriented concept. The traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism as the main body has distinct political characteristics which are represented by the consciousness of worship to the king and the ideal of kingship. The supremacy of emperors, male elders' power and principles of morals constitute the basic value structure of traditional Chinese political culture with Confucianism as the main body.

In fact, the theoretical essence of Confucianism has no necessary relation to authoritarianism. Confucianism opposes authoritarianism but does not oppose the monarchy. However, it lacks a strong mechanism for restriction from the people so that it cannot effectively prevent the breeding of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism takes advantage of certain flaws in Confucianism, and thus Confucianism actually aids a tyrant.⁵ Confucianism was established by Confucius on the basis of Zhou Gong's rules and regulations and ritual and music system. Confucius popularized, socialized, humanized and inter-personalized the political and ceremonial rules and regulations and ritual and music system; Mencius further individualized, personalized and even naturalized a further perfected Zhou Gong's rules and regulations and ritual and music system on the basis of Confucius's work and also determined the key role of Confucianism at that time and in later times. Confucianism is a philosophy of practice and answers questions in real life. Confucianism should be integrated with people's lives and allow every people to receive Confucianism education. Confucianism is life in nature and belongs to the field of thought. So, it is not suggested to interfere with it or force it to be a tool for maintaining power or serving the rule by taking political means and high-pressure policies. It provides

³ Ge Quan. The Political Value of Confucianism and Social Transformation in China [J]. *Journal of Shandong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*. 2007 (6), P62. (in Chinese)

⁴ Liu Fangling. On the Dual Separation of Political Goal and Political Main Body of Confucianism [J]. *The Journal of Harbin Committee School of the CCP*. 2005 (2), P49. (in Chinese)

⁵ Chen Daixiang. The Characteristics of Confucianism's "Enter the Society" and Its Relationship with Authoritarianism [J]. *Seeker*, 2004 (4), P110. (in Chinese)

and should only provide a deep spiritual impetus for the development of Chinese nation. Once any ideological system is politically strengthened, it is more or less suffocated, rigid, and difficult to keep up with the pace of the times.⁶ The Confucianism to be advocated today is by no means a Confucian school of a certain sect that is readily available in history, because that is not suitable for the modern time and not justified. It is necessary to firstly go back to the source, return to life itself and return to the most basic life emotions and benevolence itself. Only by reconstructing Confucianism based on this great source can it be available to adapt to the daily life style today and avoid the tendency of the all-round westernization school and the tendency of fundamentalism, and further move toward the great rejuvenation of Chinese nation.⁷ Confucianism has its historical rationality in the development of Chinese culture, but there are many contents, including some value regulations that cannot be continued in modern society. This is the destiny of traditional Confucianism in modern society. Therefore in order to overcome the absolutization of Confucianism's intrinsic "political value structure", the only way and also the necessary route for development of contemporary Confucianism is to return to the life pursued in Confucianism, representing its spiritual essence.

IV. OVERCOMING THE UNIQUE "ORTHODOXY" OF CONFUCIANISM IN CHINESE CULTURE

There is no doubt that Confucianism is the "mainstream" of Chinese culture and a "precious pearl" in the history of Chinese philosophical thought. At least in the course of Chinese historical development, there is no other ideological school that can replace its role. However, traditional Chinese culture is not surely the Confucian culture. The Chinese civilization has a long history. During the pre-Qin period, hundreds of schools appeared and competed, produced various sects, including Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism and Taoism and absorbed the Buddha in later times. In the history of China, there was a period of "exclusiveness of Confucianism". Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, once was raised to the title of "Crownless King", namely a king without an actual throne and since then Confucianism was associated with the actual social and political system at that time. With the formation and strengthening of the social and political functions of Confucianism, its role in general ethical and spiritual ideal aspects was weakened accordingly. Moreover since the birth of metaphysics, although Confucianism still maintained in dominant position in the level of political system, its function in the level of ideological cultivation had been replaced by metaphysics or Taoism and Buddhism. With the recognition and attention to "traditional culture", a "fever of Chinese classics" is arisen in China. From the only perspective of "Chinese classics", any country may have its own "national classics" so that some people oppose applying "Chinese classics" and advocate

applying "Chinese traditional culture." Nevertheless at present, most scholars in China believe that Chinese classics and Confucianism are two sides of a thing of Chinese nation. They hold that it is Chinese classics from the standpoint of the country and it is Confucianism from the standpoint of the nation. "Chinese classics" is a dynamic concept and is constantly enriched and developed. Therefore, Chinese classics contains profound content that can have positive meaning and value to the life of modern social people and help solving many problems faced by human society today. In the great mass fervor of reviving Chinese classics and promoting traditional culture, Confucianism as the foundation and mainstream of Chinese traditional ideology and culture is surely to be highly focused on by people.

If the spirit of Chinese classics is the soul of the Chinese nation, the main content of the national soul is Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, especially represented by Confucianism.⁸ Of course, it does not mean that there have been no intrinsic Chinese thoughts such as Legalism and Mohism in Chinese traditional culture. Moreover as can be seen from the distribution of culture, China has many cultures of different ethnics and different regions. These are the rich and colorful multi-cultural contents of Chinese nation formed and developed in the history. Confucianism is the main body of Chinese traditional culture, which only shows our emphasizing on Confucianism in traditional culture and does not mean that the traditional cultures of Taoism, Legalism, Mohism, Buddhism and even Islam in China are ignored; Revival of Confucianism is the important key to revive the traditional culture. It cannot be regarded as that other aspects of traditional culture are regardless of. As a saying goes, "Confucianism lies in China" is a statement of historical fact and does not mean that China forcedly tells the world that Confucianism belongs to China. Confucianism belongs to both China and the world. For the entire world culture, only if it belongs to the world can it belong to a nation. The two attributions are complementary to each other.⁹ Chinese traditional culture is a pluralistic complex that encompasses the common features of Buddhism, Taoism and Legalism and other sects, namely the positive human spirit, the strong moral sense and focusing on "neutral" thinking method. The golden mean in Confucianism, the neutral thinking in Taoism and the neutral idea Buddhism are not consistent in ontology. But in terms of methodology, they show striking consistency. This phenomenon of "All roads lead to Rome." is not an unacceptable paradox, but is determined by the national character of Chinese.¹⁰ This can be interpreted according to the relationship among Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism since Han Dynasty. Over a mutual friction, interaction, fusion and interdependence, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism

⁶ Zhong Qinglin. The Modern Meaning and Inheritance of Confucianism [J]. Wuhan University Journal (Arts & Humanity), 2006 (2), p116. (in Chinese)

⁷ Huang Yushun. "Life Confucianism" and Civil Moral Issues [J]. Journal of Beijing Youth Politics College, 2006 (2), p75. (in Chinese)

⁸ Zhou Guidian. The Spirit of Chinese Classics and Contemporary Society [J]. Journal of Beijing Administrative College, 2007 (3), p 92. (in Chinese)

⁹ Han Xing. Confucianism and Chinese Cultural Integration under the Background of Globalization [J]. Eastern Forum, 2006 (1), p14. (in Chinese)

¹⁰ Wang Run. Discuss the Humanistic Soul of the Traditional Culture in China from the "Middle of the Road" [J]. Journal of Changsha University, 2008 (4), p 14 (in Chinese)

basically form a virtuously-circulated and harmonious pattern, with mutually opposite, fused and co-existing state of the three sects. They are the objective and concrete representation of the "harmonious" spirit in Chinese culture and a typical example of "harmony in diversity".¹¹ In other words, in the history of China, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were always accompanied, questioned and complemented by each other, forming a situation dominated by the three powerful rivals. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have respectively different flags and are also complementary to each other to apply to the basic pattern of the society. This basic pattern of Chinese culture continued until the end of the 19th century and even the early 20th century. Therefore, it can be said that the traditional Chinese culture is a culture dominated by the mutually fused and complementary Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Over a long-term mutual communication and conflict, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have already been involved in each other mutually; but at the same time, they have not been merged into one sect but always maintain their own fundamental characteristics and distinctive features. The multi-integration maintaining harmony in diversity is the inner quality and great spirit of the splendid Chinese culture. This culture gets the principles of morals in Confucianism, the unconventional feature of Taoism and the surpassing feature of Buddhism organically combined together and establishes a value system rooted into real life and based on the reality of human beings and the unconventional inner character and rigid structure.¹² If a serious and careful investigation is made on the beliefs of most members of the traditional society in most of their lives, it may be found that the doctrines of Taoism and Buddhism play a role not interior to that of Confucianism. Just because of the support from the rulers can Confucianism occupy the center of ideology. But if there is not Taoism and Buddhism filling the broad spiritual space left by Confucianism, Confucianism will be difficult to deal with all the affairs.

V. CONCLUSION

In short, there is no doubt about the historical role of Confucianism but different views and thoughts about whether it is and will be useful for the present and the future. A culture having influenced the history of a nation for thousands of years and also affected the political, economic, cultural and life fields of neighboring countries surely has its rationality and positive and active elements. However, Confucianism also has elements that hinder the progress and development of the society. Meanwhile with the change of the times, there must be elements that may become negative elements from the original positive elements. Therefore, Confucianism often has to think about the relationship with modernity and making Confucianism continue to play a role in the development of human history and culture.

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