

Inside the Revival of Confucianism in Mainland China: The Vicissitudes of Confucian Classics in Contemporary China as an Example

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The topic I address here is “inside the revival of Confucianism in Mainland China”. The specific approach to this issue I deliberately chose is to scrutinize the vicissitudes of Confucian classics in a changing contemporary China. By contemporary, I mean the period from 1949 until now; by China, I mean Mainland China. By “changing”, I mean not only a rapidly evolving China, but also evolution in Chinese society’s treatment of Confucian classics. The target of this paper is to provide a personal reflection on the so-called revival of Confucianism in today’s China.

My paper includes three parts: first, a retrospective on the vicissitudes of Confucian classics in contemporary China; second, the general state of Confucian “classics education” in today’s China and more particularly in China’s “general education” program; and third, some personal observations on the matter. Given the limited space, my comments are brief.

A Retrospective

Regarding the vicissitudes of Confucian classics in contemporary China, like the fate of Confucian tradition as a whole, it can be metaphorically but vividly expressed by two sentences of a well-known Song dynasty poem,

Seeing mountains’ climbing and rivers’ curving,
I could see no way ahead,
Suddenly in the shade of the willows and amidst shining flowers,
a village appeared.¹

As the verse suggest, the fate of Confucian classics in its motherland can be divided into two sharply contrasting eras. From 1949 until the 1970s was the period of “mountains’ climbing and rivers’ curving”, with “no way ahead in sight”. The situation of Confucian tradition during that period was deplorable. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had not only inherited the anti-traditionalism

1 山重水複疑無路，柳暗花明又一村。The poem is called “You Shanxi cun” 遊山西村 [Traveling to the village to the west of the mountain] by Lu You 陸遊 (1125–1200).

of the May Fourth Movement but also carried it to an extreme. Anything Confucian became a target of attack, or, to use an expression current in the 1960s and 1970s, “a target of proletarian dictatorship” (*wuchan jieji zhuanzheng de duixiang* 無產階級專政的對象), which should be “swept into the dustbin of history” (*saojin lishi de lajidui* 掃進歷史的垃圾堆). At no level of education could Confucian “classics” be taught or studied at all, and the term “classics” (i.e. canonized) at that time could only refer to works of the Marx-Leninist tradition. Chinese culture in Mainland China as dominated by the Chinese Communist Party was radically uprooted from its own tradition. Fortunately, this period has now itself been “swept into the dustbin of history”.

Then, “Suddenly in the shade of the willows and amidst shining flowers, a village appeared”, a new way beckoned to us in the current era, which began in the 1980s. Confucian classics could once again be studied in a new era of openness, leading many to think that Confucianism and the Confucian classics are experiencing a revival. More precisely, this period can be divided into two stages: pre and post the year 2000. Between 1978 and 2000, the party and the government started to reassess Confucianism, and Confucian studies gradually became a major field in the academic world. There was even a boom in traditional scholarship, focused mainly on Confucian studies, starting with Peking University in the 1990s. This phenomenon was spoken of as “the heat or fever of traditional scholarship” (*guoxue re* 國學熱) and was overplayed by the mass media (truly it was far from being a “heat or fever,” *re* 熱). Only after 2000 did the aspirations of ordinary people for learning and understanding the Confucian tradition really spread throughout the country. Yet the successful promotion of Confucian classics, as in Yu Dan’s show based on the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), should not be attributed to her personal engagement with the classics. Rather, it is a reflection of popular demand from ordinary Chinese people, who have felt a great vacuum in the value system after the collapse of communist ideology in the 1980s.

From my own experience I can cite an occasion in 2003. I was in a well known bookstore, the Fengrusong 風入松 (“Forest Song”), near Peking University, when a blue-collar man asked me where he could find a biography of Confucius by Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990), a great representative of traditional Chinese scholarship. After I told him where he should look, I asked, “Why do you especially want to buy a book like this”. He answered simply, “I would like to buy it for my son.” At that moment, I realized the age of anti-traditionalism was really gone, though a long journey still lay ahead of us if we wanted to restore our tradition. I do not believe that the reconstruction of a Chinese value system necessarily means reproducing another Confucian China, like the tradi-

tional China of the past. But I do believe that some Confucian values found in the Confucian classics should play an important role in any new system.

Confucianism was explored anew after the 1980s. The first indication of this was the establishment of certain institutions authorized by the party and government, for instance, the China Confucius Foundation (CCF, Zhongguo Kongzi jijinhui 中國孔子基金會) in 1984 and the International Confucian Association (ICA, Guoji ruxue lianhehui 國際儒學聯合會) in 1994.² The CCF was established and financially supported by the central government. The late former vice-premier Gu Mu 谷牧, a veteran and senior cadre of the CCP, was the first president of the CCF and had played an important role until his death in 2009. Quite a lot of academic activities aiming to promote the study and transmission of Confucianism, especially international conferences, have been supported by the CCF, and the periodical *Confucius Study* 孔子研究, the first official journal focusing on Confucianism after 1949, has been directly run by the CCF. Indeed, the CCF was a nationwide organization and exerted an influence on the development of Confucianism in China. Many overseas scholars of Confucianism have been invited to attend conferences hosted by the CCF. But right now, the CCF has gradually been transformed into a local organization and completely become an official section of the Shandong provincial party committee. Almost all the people who hold power are officials of the Shandong provincial party committee. The background and development of the ICA was very similar to those of the CCF. But the policymakers of the ICA now consist not only of retired high officials of the party but also of successful businessmen, although many scholars who are well established in Confucian studies are members of the board of the council. Furthermore, international activities related to Confucianism are still strongly promoted by the ICA. This is different from the CCF. In any case, until now, the ICA and the CCF are still the most influential organizations of Confucian studies in China. But the challenge these two organizations are facing is politicization and commercialization. This involves two trends of the current development of Confucianism in Mainland China I am going to address in the third part of this article.

The second wave involved more academic research in Confucian Studies, with Marxism no longer serving as an interpretive framework. More recently there has been a broad popularization of Confucian classics among ordinary Chinese people; and ordinary people as well as Confucian scholars have called for the incorporation of the Confucian classics into our education system. Recently, a nine and a half meter high Confucius statue was set up in front of the national historical museum near Tian'an men square. It is regarded as a strong

2 The official websites of the CCF and the ICA are respectively: www.chinakongzi.org/bhxx and www.ica.org.cn/gjrl.php.

symbol that Confucianism is promoted by the authorities.³ Many indications, various training programs in Confucianism, emerging self-claimed Confucian believers, increasing Confucian vocabulary in mass media, etc., all add to an impression that Confucianism is indeed coming home with official support. But through the riot of colors, can we say that Confucian values are nowadays regained by the Chinese people? This is a very complicated issue that needs to be tackled from interrelated perspectives. But, as I mentioned at the very beginning of this paper, the perspective I am particularly taking is to focus on the encounters of Confucian classics, especially the role that Confucian classics play in the general education system today in Mainland China, upon which my personal remarks will be based.

Confucian Classics Today and General Education

Today, Confucian classics should be assessed in two distinct but related contexts: Confucian classics in Chinese society and Confucian classics as part of official university curricula. In the first category, there is seemingly a Classics boom. In the second category, it seems Confucian classics are still fighting for legitimacy.

According to a survey of the International Confucian Association (ICA) in 2007, the study of Confucian classics has been increasing. From kindergarten to middle school, there has been an explosion in the recitation of Confucian classics with an estimated ten million children involved. This activity developed spontaneously and has enjoyed the support of twenty million parents and teachers with the rare support of the government. Some nongovernmental, volunteer organizations, such as Yidan Xuetang 一耽學堂 in Beijing and Mingde Guoxue Guan 明德國學館 in Tianjin, have played an important role in promoting the recitation of the Confucian classics. For example, Yidan Xuetang was created by a graduate student of the Department of Philosophy of Peking University. Initially, almost all members were young college students who volunteered to promote the recitation of the Confucian classics. Now, many elderly people join Yidan Xuetang and become volunteers as well.⁴

3 But just a couple of weeks before I am making the final proof of this paper, the Confucius statue was moved out of Tian'an men square. I cannot discuss the meaning and significance of this inconsistent phenomenon here. But, obviously, it indicates the disaccord among the authorities and Confucianism is still far from being a national ideology.

4 The website of Yidan Xuetang is www.yidan.net. What it has been doing is to promote the study of Confucian classics and to purify people by Confucian values. In this sense, the role it plays is similar to a popular religious organization. But popular religious organizations are usually, if not absolutely prohibited in Mainland China.

In higher education, many centers for Confucian Studies or schools of National Learning 國學院 have been established, with studies of the Confucian classics playing an important role. For example, the Chinese People's University (Zhongguo Renmin Daxue 中國人民大學), which had been well-known for its strong adherence to Communist ideology, ironically enough became the first to establish a school of Confucius Studies in 2002. Other similar institutions quickly followed suit.

Now, even in business circles, there is a passion among successful businessmen for studying Confucian classics. To meet this rising interest in the Confucian classics, new organizations, both official and popular, have rushed to provide new publications on these classics; most of them are quite popular, if not best-sellers. It is even estimated that more than one hundred modern editions and translations of the *Analects* were published in the year 2007 alone. All of this seems to indicate that the Confucian classics are flourishing.

Despite increasing popularity among the people, the Confucian classics have not been officially adopted into the education system at any level and are not part of the general education requirements in universities. At present there are basically two models of general education in Chinese universities. One is called "Cultural Quality Education Courses" (*wenhua suzhi jiaoyu ke* 文化素質教育課), which offers a range of elective courses. In the two leading universities of China, Peking University and Tsinghua University, the general education system follows this model. The model includes a foreign language (usually English), physical education and computer skills, but the main part is still "two subjects" (*liang ke* 兩課), namely: "Marxist theory" (*Makesi zhuyi lilun* 馬克斯主義理論) and "thought and moral character" (*sixiang pinde* 思想品德), that is, the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. There is still no room for the Confucian classics. At Tsinghua University, for instance, those who teach *liang ke* despite its marginal status in terms of academic research and scholarship have been buttressed by substantial financial support from both university authorities and the central government, while the support for those who teach Chinese literature, history and philosophy has always been quite limited. Although I cannot offer concrete statistical figures as far as "general education" is concerned, the Tsinghua model is a leading and pervasive one in most Chinese universities.

But recently, hints of a new dawn have emerged. In 2005, with the establishment of Fudan College (Fudan xueyuan 復旦學院), another model of general education was inaugurated by Fudan University in Shanghai. Although it is ba-

What distinguishes Yidan Xuetang from other popular religious organizations and makes it immune from prohibition, I assume, is the patriotism it advocates. Mingde Guoxue Guan is basically the same.

sically a copy of the School of Arts and Sciences of Harvard and Yale as far as form is concerned, Confucian classics started to be incorporated into the general education system for the first time since 1949 in China. The most striking feature of this system that differentiates it from the prevailing one that Tsinghua represents is exactly the absence of Communist ideology and the acceptance of some Confucian classics. I noticed that some Confucian classics (i.e. *jing* and *zi*), such as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Mengzi* 孟子, *Xunzi* 荀子, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and the *Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) are included. Even if there is still a *liang ke*, it is indeed a positive change that it was separated from the formal general education system. Of course, even taking Fudan's new model as an example, the proportion of Confucian classics in the general education system is still very small. The total number of courses in Fudan's general education system is almost sixty, while only six on Confucian classics are taught. And when we scrutinize the components of this system, we still have to say it's basically a cold platter and without a clear "core". Consequently, we have to wait to see whether or not this model can be adopted by the authorities and put into effect throughout the country.

Some Personal Observations and Remarks

Finally, here are my thoughts regarding the true repossession of Confucian classics by the Chinese people, with respect to three issues that need to be addressed.

Strictly speaking, a genuine general education program, or core curriculum, has not yet been established in China. As we know, the core of general education in American universities has for the most part been centered on the classics, while traditional Chinese education on the classics (or at least on the Confucian core) has aimed at character building and the cultivation of virtues. Indeed what Confucian tradition did well were exactly character building and the cultivation of virtues rather than instilling a specialized concrete knowledge. Even before 1949, this remained true to some extent. It was only after 1949 that such education was thoroughly eradicated. So, although many efforts have been made since 2000, until educators in general and high officials in the Ministry of Education come up with a clearer understanding of general education as distinct from the "two subjects" (*liang ke*) system, it will not be possible to promote Confucian classics seriously in higher education.

An even bigger problem today is the erosion caused by the commercialization of the Confucian classics. Though more and more people are whole hearted in their desire to learn and understand the wisdom preserved in Confucian classics, an important issue is who is qualified to teach them? If commercialization means popularization by the mass media so that more and more ordinary peo-

ple can understand Confucian classics, then that is a good thing. But if teachers of Confucian classics are not well trained, the mass media may promote mere opportunists just to make a profit. This would be a disaster not only for Confucian classics, but also for the unsuspecting people who are taken in. I believe most of the promoters are sincere in devoting themselves to this great endeavor, but at the same time we must recognize that there are always some people who lack such true commitment. If Confucian classics become fashionable as a way to gain fame and money, it will attract opportunists who will exploit the Confucian classics for their own personal gain. After a long dormancy of Confucian tradition in particular and of traditional Chinese learning, it's not easy to find enough qualified teachers to meet the need of so many ordinary Chinese people. This is also one of the reasons that those charlatans are now fishing in troubled water and masquerade as so-called *guoxue dashi* 國學大師 (masters of the traditional learning). But on the other hand, we have to concede that the reason those charlatans can succeed is due to a real and inner aspiration to those Confucian values strongly emerging from people's hearts. It's exactly this deep aspiration inside people that constitutes a solid and wide social ground for the popularity of Confucian classics. In this sense, we do have to see there is a great chance for Chinese people to regain Confucian values if people's aspiration can be properly treated and oriented.

Beside the negative effects of commercialization, there is the danger of the politicization of Confucianism. By politicization, I mean two mutually interwoven things. One is that Confucianism may be deliberately used by proponents of narrow-minded nationalism. Another is that Confucianism may be shaped so as to oppose freedom, democracy and human rights. In either case, it could serve nothing but to maintain the legitimacy of the present corrupt regime. For example, Yu Dan, trained in Mass Media rather than Confucian Studies and now a star of popularizing the *Analects*, was criticized for de-politicization of Confucius.⁵ It is a correct observation on one hand. But on the other, this apparent de-politicization is a product of current Chinese politics or serves a certain political standpoint. The politically critical spirit repeatedly springing up in Chinese history, not only embodied by Confucius but also practiced by almost every Confucian masters,⁶ was implicitly and purposely

5 See Bell 2007.

6 I would like to name three examples here to indicate this critical Confucian spirit. In the *Analects*, when Zilu asked Kongzi how to serve the King, Kongzi said, "Don't cheat him, but you should frankly remonstrate with him." (子路問事君，子曰：“勿欺也，而犯之。”) In a newly excavated Confucian text, *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出, when King Mu of Lu asked Zisi, the grandson of Kongzi, who can be called loyal ministers, Zisi answered, "those who always point out the mistakes of the King are

neglected in that de-politicization, which is actually imbued with a political implication that drives people to a certain political orientation. As far as consequence is concerned, this de-politicization of Confucianism, i.e., the neglect of Confucian spirit of political and social critique, is perfectly in conjugation with the strategy of harmony advocated by the CCP.⁷ This strategy has two targets. Domestically, it intends to make people keep the *status quo* instead of thinking over the ultimate cause of all social injustice. Internationally, it wants to convince people that China will not be an aggressive super power that will threaten other countries. Maybe people like Yu Dan don't have this awareness; they just want to make their own profit. But the key is they must be suppressed if their advocacy of Confucian values is not in line with this strategy of the CCP. Only if one promotes values that contribute to the strategy, or a so-called "harmonious society", can she or he be given the market totally controlled by the government and the party. So, we can see that, unfortunately, commercialization and politicization, money and power, now are mutually reinforced and in complete harmony.

Ironically, it is now the original suppressor or terminator of Chinese culture in general and Confucian tradition in particular, that claims to be upholding Confucian values. It is true that the CCP itself is undergoing some transformation, but it is too reckless to think it will really give up its present domination and share power with others unless it feels some external pressure. It is naïve to think that the CCP embraces Confucian values simply because some leaders of the CCP have quoted a few words of Confucianism in their public talks. Marxism is still the national ideology although it is actually downrightly dead in most, if not all Chinese people's minds, and the head of the CCP has even strengthened this ideology since he has come to power. Two examples here, I believe, can forcefully clarify this point. One is a new policy about establishing

loyal ministers.” (魯穆公問於子思曰：“何如而可謂忠臣？”子思曰：“恒稱其君之惡者，可謂忠臣矣。”) Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052), an exemplary Confucian revered by almost all later Confucian intellectuals, was banished from the court three times because of his remonstrance with the emperor. Every time he got relegation, there were Confucian official-scholars who gave him a farewell dinner and praised the three relegations as “three honors” (*san guang* 三光).

7 We cannot imagine that a series of overseas activities for promoting Yu Dan's popular book on the *Analects* and the value of harmony as well is simply her personal business without financial support, or at least connivance, from the Chinese government. For instance, her meeting with the former Japanese Prime Minister, Yasuo Fukuda 福田康夫, deserves a deep consideration. It's far from a simple cultural activity, let alone a business travel. Rather, the political implication is self-evident and should not be ignored.

a school of Marxism in every university directly affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education. The other is the design of the *Guidance of Applying for National Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences* (Guojia sheke jijin shenqing zhinan 國家社科基金申請指南) issued annually by a special institution, the office of National Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences, which is the largest financial resource for humanities and social sciences in China and directly supervised by the Publicity Department (Zhongxuan bu 中宣部) of the CCP. In the annual guidelines of 2009 (almost the same with that of 2008 and 2007), the designs about Marxism and the CCP are more than thirty pages while the designs about Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy together are less than three pages.

If history can be a mirror, it shows us there have been too many dictators in Chinese history who were good at playing this double-faced deceit. To cry wine and sell vinegar is their usual practice. For example, emperor Xuandi 宣帝 of the Western Han dynasty once explicitly admonished his son, the later emperor Yuandi 元帝, that the constitution they actually follow was not the Confucian ideal that entails a humane way of politics, but a blend of Confucian benevolent government in its outward appearance and Legalist dictatorship as its inner essence.⁸ In the transition of China from an empire to a modern republic, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 and some other warlords in modern China were all advocates of Confucianism and even tried once to establish Confucianism as a national religion. Similarly and obviously, what this kind of deceit eventually brings will not be a real revival of Confucianism but a complete destruction of Confucian values, which the anti-traditionalism initiated by the May Fourth Movement actually had never accomplished.

It's a good thing that Confucian classics can be studied and understood, and that Confucian values can start to play an important role in Chinese society once again, regardless of whether anything like a new Confucian China is to emerge from this. It could be a disaster for Confucianism, however, if it is taken advantage of by a corrupt and despotic political power. Values like freedom, democracy and human rights are not exclusive to the Western tradition. We can find ingredients or spirits of these values in other great traditions, Chinese as well as Indian, and so on, although the manifestations of those values are highly varied in different geographical and historical contexts. Amartya Sen has recently stressed the resource for democracy as public reasoning in Indian tradition.⁹ Both Professor Yü Ying-shih (Yu Yingshi 余英時), a great master of Chi-

8 This story is recorded in the "Annals of Yuandi" ("Yuandi ji" 元帝紀) of the *Han Shu* 漢書.

9 See Sen 2005.

nese history and thought, and Professor de Bary, who made great contributions to introducing East Asian Classics to the West, have repeatedly pointed out the dimensions of a kind of democracy and liberal tradition in Chinese tradition.¹⁰ Before them, even Hu Shih (Hu Shi 胡適), who was the most important leading figure of New Culture movement in the 1920s and stern critic of traditional Chinese culture, also mostly argued in his English works that there has been a tradition of fighting for freedom embodied by those Confucian figures in Chinese history.¹¹ So, it would be unfortunate for Confucianism to be utilized by a corrupt and despotic establishment simply for nationalist purposes at the expense of values actually embedded in universal humanity. In that case Confucianism would not be flourishing but withering, and such politicization and commercialization would really be the kiss of death for the Confucian classics.¹²

In truth, the wisdom revealed in the Confucian classics is not for the Chinese people alone but for the people of the entire world. And as Confucian values are starting to become an integral part of the consciousness of peoples in the West, the prospect of Confucian classics for the emerging world would be strongly enhanced if prospects for Confucian classics could be made more promising in the motherland itself. But whether Confucian classics can successfully contribute to the reconstruction of the value system of the Chinese people at present and in the future depends on three interrelated conditions: first, if an educational system that focuses on the Confucian classics and includes other great books as well can be established; second, if commercialization and superficial popularization can be bridled to a certain extent, if not successfully avoided; and third, if Confucian values can be effectively promoted to transform a degenerate kind of politics without being contaminated and corrupted in the process. A real revival of Confucianism in China cannot be anticipated and Confucianism will never be authentically “coming home” unless these aspects can be realized. Any claim of the revival of Confucianism in Mainland China simply based upon seemingly scientific statistic numbers, for instance, how many training programs of Confucian classics are established, how many Confucian words that politicians quoted, is superficial. Last but not least, I would like to say, a revival of Confucianism, at least for me, will and should not mean a reconstruction of a “Confucian China.” Confucian values will and should be part of a great picture of values jointly constructed by all great traditions, not only Buddhism, Daoism but Christianity, Islam and others in an era of globalization.

10 Bary 1983 and 1998; Bary and Tu 1998; Yü 1997 and 2000.

11 See Hu 1941.

12 I've already expressed this worry in two previously published essays. See Peng 2006 and 2009.

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