

## **OLD SAGE FOR NEW AGE? THE REVIVAL OF RELIGIOUS CONFUCIANISM IN CHINA**

### **Abstract**

In recent years, Confucianism has been once again identified as the essence of Chinese civilization and a religion that was central to the Chinese people throughout China's long history. Scholars are appealing to the Communist Party to make Confucianism the State religion (*guojiao*). What are the political implications of the phenomena? Can these claims stand to intellectual scrutiny? Conducting a brief historical survey of religious Confucianism in Chinese politics, in addition to an analysis of shared principles essential to various Confucianist positions today, this paper argues that religious Confucianism presented by its contemporary promoters is a constructed myth originated mainly from the Qing times (1644-1911). The supposed Confucian teaching does not carry religious meaningfulness associated to either individual existence or social life in contemporary China. It remains powerful primarily in connection to the State, or a collective nation (*Zhonghua*), vis-à-vis the world outside ethnic Han communities. Despite this - or precisely because of this - a revived religious Confucianism may have the greatest potential to become a political force in China in our globalizing age, more so than any other major world religions, even if others may have larger Chinese following than Confucianism.

**Key words:** Religious Confucianism, Daoism, All-under-Heaven, filial piety, contemporary China, nationalism

In early 2011, a series of mass protests in Egypt toppled the thirty-year old Mubarak dictatorship. However, the Revolution failed to generate its own political parties of strong platform and solid social foundations. With much uncertainty for more than a year, the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious organization that was persecuted under Mubarak but did not take front lines in the Revolution, eventually won both parliament majority and presidential election, seizing the fruit of the popular democratization movement. Suppose that an Egyptian style revolution takes place in China and a democratic election is to be held. Will there

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be any contenders put forward by religious societies and winning political power to rule the future China, as the Muslim Brotherhood is doing in Egypt now?

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has ruled the mainland as an atheist regime for more than sixty years. Its religious policy went through many changes, causing great turmoil in the practice of people's religious life. Nonetheless, there is a general recognition that recent economic growth and the relative liberalization in private sphere have brought about flourishing religious activities to the country. What divides observers is how to explain the phenomena. Does it indicate a post-secular turn of leniency in the CPC's religion policy or a sophisticated manipulation by the Party? Most cases, for the Paris-based scholar Ji Zhe, it is the latter rather than the former. Looking at the Party's selective flexibility towards various religious groups and the government's greedy involvement in sharing the profit of religious tourism, he singles out religious autonomy as the key factor that is missing, resulting in a state of "secularization without secularism".<sup>2</sup> More specifically, we may add, for reasons of survival under potential persecution, none of the major religions, be it Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, or other Evangelic Christianity, has aspired to representing a collective future for "China;" nor have they formulated political positions other than demanding freedom of worship. There are good reasons to think that burgeoning religious life in the mainland today may not be able to produce its political party with strong ideological positions, even though its continuing growth may help to bring democratization to China. The only exception is Confucianism.

Confucius and Confucianism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have had dramatic experiences. When Mao Zedong (1893-1976) died and the decade-long Cultural Revolution came to an end, most people younger than thirty at the time would know Confucius in a negative light only. That they had some knowledge about the ancient sage at all was largely thanks to political campaigns launched by Mao, in particular when he targeted Confucius as the root cause for reactionary thought in China. Partly due to this background, when critical reflections surged in the early 1980s against the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism became once again the culprit, along with China's long tradition of "feudal culture", for what went wrong under Mao and his personal cult. Yet, the Reform Era of Opening Up in the 1980s also invited a starkly different image of Confucianism to the PRC.

Cultural exchange with the outside world brought a stream of overseas scholars to visit China for the first time since 1949, who used to be blocked out by the Cold War barriers. Their interpretations of China's tradition were vastly different from what people in the mainland had hitherto been used to. Starting from then, Confucius and Confucianism gradually gained positive foothold in academic world. A new phenomenon in the twenty-first century is that the so-

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2 See Ji Zhe's discussion in "Secularization without Secularism: The Political-Religious Configuration of Post-89 China," 2011.

cial prestige of Confucius and Confucianism has been growing rapidly in the past decade. Nowadays, all provinces and many cities and counties in China are offering sacrifices at local Confucian temples annually. The most elaborate ones are held at Confucius' hometown in Shandong Province twice a year. State television stations have been broadcasting live from there since 2004. High-rank officials from Beijing and the provincial capital have participated annually as well. Also in 2004, the central government launched the global project of Confucius Institute, which has more than 300 branches in more than 100 countries around the world today. The office in charge of the project is aiming to increase the total number up to 500 by 2020.

To be sure, not all efforts of promoting Confucianism are sponsored or supported by the State. The central government often appears ambiguous or trying to be discreet. In January 2011, a nearly ten-meter (about 30 feet) tall bronze statue of Confucius was erected next to Tiananmen Square in central Beijing, facing the portrait of Mao Zedong on Tiananmen Gate across the Chang'an Avenue. It caused all kinds of reactions on the Internet and many commentaries in foreign media and, 100 days later, was removed quietly overnight, in a very non-ceremonial fashion.<sup>3</sup> But, this has not subdued the widespread enthusiasm. Local officials still participated in various sacrificing ceremonies around the country, from Confucius' hometown to the supposed burying ground of the mystic Yellow Emperor, considered to be the ancestor of every single "Chinese" around the world in human history.

Of all the advocates today, the loudest are some self-claimed Confucian intellectuals; and the most enthusiastic ones are often young students from high ranking universities, who often take the initiative in local worshiping ceremonies. Both groups have appealed for official support on the ground that Confucianism is the tradition that every responsible Chinese must carry on. They have set up various private academies for adults and children around the country to study the Confucian Classics and imbue the teaching into daily practice. Some intellectuals focus more on Confucianism as political philosophy than as religious practice. Others have been forthright in advocating State sanctions to make Confucianism China's national religion (*guojiao*). Noticeable differences notwithstanding, these people do not argue against each other, as if observing tacitly a "united front" among themselves against critics and non-followers. What bounds them together are claims that Confucianism representing "China" or "Chineseness" in our globalizing era.<sup>4</sup> The multi-faceted united front seems to provide the Confu-

3 See New York Times, "Confucius Statue Vanished Near Tiananmen Square," April 22, 2011. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html> (visited on 24/08/12).

4 E.g. "The government [should] recognize the mainstream value position of Confucius and Confucianism, in order to strengthen the chance of constructing a modern state in China"; "Confucianism is none other than China's life or Chinese civilization itself" Yao Zhongqiu, "Confucianist Revival and China's intellectual-political future," *Sixiang*20, p. 156; 169. Also see Jiang Qing and Daniel A. Bell, "A Confucian Constitution for China".

cianist revival great potential to affect future socio-political life in China.

However, can the claims stand intellectual scrutiny? We shall now turn to a brief survey of historical Confucianism, to demonstrate that Confucianism was never exclusively dominant in the religious life of Chinese society. Moreover, this paper contends that contemporary presentations of "Confucianism" have been largely shaped by practices in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), a relatively recent period. This will be followed by a brief comparison of Confucianist advocates today and their predecessors since the late nineteenth century. A final part will consider the implications of their major claims about the importance of Confucianism for China, today and tomorrow.

### Religious Confucianism in History

To consider "religious Confucianism" in Chinese history, we must be clear that terms like "religion", "belief", or "faith", are used here only in a loose sense, without always corresponding strictly to their Christian connotations in conventional English expression.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the term "Confucianism" itself represents a number of different conceptual constructions over more than two thousand years. The kind of "Confucianism" that still affects modern Chinese thinking and cultural life is, in one way or another, largely the product of the second millennium of Christian history, especially that of the 16th-19th centuries, although the scriptures it depends on are preserved from a thousand years earlier. We need to look at both periods but also distinguish them carefully. Meanwhile, major religions always coexisted in Chinese history, mutually influencing each other in mixed practices. We need to look at religious life in general, to assess Confucianism as part of the whole picture of each historical period. In addition, socio-economic development contributes to changes in politico-cultural life, which means that, when examining sweeping claims about a religious or intellectual school in connection to a country's cultural history, it may not be enough to rely on the classic scriptures alone. While keeping these points in mind, it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a thorough survey of religious Confucianism in history. Below we will focus on several important issues that are highly relevant to today's Confucian revival phenomena.

#### Guardian of Hierarchical Unity

Some basic features in Confucian belief existed long before Confucius's (551-479 BC) time. "Confucianism" is known in Chinese as the *ru* tradition (*rujia* for "*ru* school"; *rujiao* for "*ru* teaching," or *ruxue* for "*ru* - learning"). In ancient China the *ru*, a title for people belonging to the lower-rank noble class of *shi*, were usually

5 Cf. Hymes on "belief" in *Way and Byway*, pp. 11-14; Jiang Yonglin on "religion" in *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*, pp. 3-17.

in charge of ritual performance, record keeping, and document interpretation, among other duties. The English term, taken from Confucius's name, reflects the general belief that Confucius was responsible for putting the Classics into how they have appeared ever since. But in reality, "Confucian Classics" are not works all written by Confucius or his disciples. The core texts of the Classics are ancient scriptures.<sup>6</sup> The general belief in China, particularly since the thirteenth century, went further. Having Compiled the Classics, Confucius also transmitted the invaluable knowledge about Dao, the Way of the Sage-kings who ruled in the Golden Age of a mystic antiquity. Thereupon, Confucius himself becomes a sage figure, for he is the one who knows best how an ideal world should be, despite the contradictory fact that he himself was never an actual ruler. The Confucian ideal, in a nutshell, derives its legitimacy from the Heaven and Earth (*tian-di*) and manifests itself in a hierarchical social order, which stipulates that a ruler commands unconditional authority over his subject, as does father over son, and husband over wife. In addition, the ruler also derives his legitimacy from his ancestral line. By first sight, Confucianism does not appear particularly religious, in contrast to concerns in other world great religions over gods, spirits, death, or the prime driver of the universe. But colored in political philosophy notwithstanding, three concepts with religious implications stand out here: the Dao; the Heaven-and-Earth; and ancestral worshipping. All the three have their origins in an earlier time, aptly presented in the Classics that Confucius worked on.<sup>7</sup> Except ancestral worshipping, Dao and Heaven-and-Earth are equally important for thinkers of other schools, such as Legalism and Mohism in the Warring States period (5th c. – 221, BC). Similarly, Daoism in both its philosophical and religious traditions takes its name from the Dao, as shown in the earliest Daoist text, the *Dao De Jing* (Tao te ching). These different schools all attended to political philosophy extensively. They might focus on the ruler viewing his subjects indiscriminately (e.g. Legalism), or on the individual being (e.g. Daoism). In contrast, Confucianism was the only one with a very strong position in the socio hierarchy, from the ruler in his court to a male-dominating family setting.<sup>8</sup>

Ideas change over time. Firstly, the philosophically charged concept Dao had its turns of ebbing and rising within the Confucian tradition. Secondly, the significance of Earth diminished rapidly in a unified empire since the Qin (221-206 BC) and the Han (206 BC – 220 AD), leaving the idea of Heaven standing alone to

6 The *wujing* (five Classics), *Yi-jing* (Book of change), *Shi-jing* (The Odes), *Shangshu* (The Book), *Yili* (Rites), and *Chunqiu* (Annals of Spring and Autumn), all preceded Confucius' time. Of these titles, the *Rites* is often grouped with two other books on rites, *Zhouli* (Rites of the Zhou) and *Liji* (Book of rites) that came much later. The Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism added *sishu* (four books) as the must for education, which included Confucius's *Analects* (see discussions below).

7 See Zhang Hao's (Hao Chang) insightful discussion in "Politics and Teaching – Unified or in Duality?" in *Reflexion20*.

8 The *rujia* Confucianism of the Warring States period already developed into major branches, some leaning to Legalism and others, such as Mencius, who was regarded by later generations as sagely as second to Confucius only, emphasized the individual's independence.

issue prophecy and divinize political legitimacy. Following this, the active concern of Confucianism experienced an important shift from the Heaven (*tian*) to all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*), from worshipping the former to explicating the best for the latter. The emphases were to be on grand unity, centralized rule, and family-based patriarchal hierarchy. And thirdly, ancestral worshipping had its own trajectory, from coupled with filial piety for the top ruling classes in the Han dynasty, to a split there after, retaining ancestral worshipping for rulers when filial piety spread out, before the two aspects merged once again among commoner classes many centuries later.

Historically speaking, and perhaps related to its social origins in *ru*, "Confucianism" is a text-based, ritual-centered tradition. Also related to this origin, for about a thousand years (3rd c. BC – 8th c. AD), when education was accessible to privileged classes only, most Confucianists were administrative officials, either under noble lords or appointed directly by a central government. Socially speaking, the number of Confucian official grew steadily in the long process of bureaucratization from early on.<sup>9</sup> Determined by its basic ideas and its social bases, Confucianism tended to be a stabilizing ideology for an established empire in China's successive dynasties.

### Convergence of "Three Teachings"

Religious Daoism and Confucianism influenced each other from early on. The concept Dao in Daoism, like filial piety in Confucianism, existed long before these schools came to be known. For both schools, Dao represents the essence of things, or the whole universe. Scholars usually regard the Qin dynasty (221-207 BC) as Legalistic and the Han (202 BC-220 AD) to be initially Daoist and turned to Confucianism after the 130s BC. But this view is to look at politics or political philosophies only. If we take religion into consideration, Daoist teaching stands out prominently for the Qin-Han period as a whole. The Daoist guidance was regarded indispensable, assisting the throne to achieve immortality (e.g. Qin Shihuang, 259-210 BC) or divinize a ruler's mandate to power (e.g. Han Wudi, 156-87 BC). Even after Han Wudi adopted Dong Zhongshu's (179-104 BC) proposal to uphold "Confucianism" alone and dismiss all other teachings, Daoism was welcomed at the Han court by successive emperors, including Han Wudi himself.<sup>10</sup>

Disciples of both Daoism and Confucianism were called *shi* or *fangshi*, interchangeably at this time in contrast to later times when the former would be reserved for Confucians only and the latter referring to religious Daoist priests. During the Han, the two teachings permeated into each other's practices. Dong Zhongshu's version of "Confucianism" shares with Daoism many mystical ele-

9 Cf. Wang Yanan, *A Study of China's Bureaucratic Politics*, 29-62.

10 Lü Xichen, *Daoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*, pp. 75-83; 105-33.

ments, primarily responsible for linking divine intention of the Heaven to ruling legitimacy of the Han court. A key difference between the two teachings is that Confucians depended on the Classics scriptures and mainly interpreted events and phenomena, even though their explanation may be full of wildly stretched free-associations. Daoists, on the other hand, positively conducted sessions to get in touch with divine spirit.<sup>11</sup> However, even in this regard, the two pervaded each other. After the court issued exclusive sanction to Confucianism, many Daoist *fangshi* asserting their special techniques or recipes would extend their divinizing claims to the Confucian Classics, in the exact manner as Dong Zhongshu did with his version of Confucian studies.<sup>12</sup>

If “Confucianism” up to this moment did not have an exclusively clear image, the introduction of Buddhism into China in the first century AD made the situation only more complicated for today’s advocates. The three religions – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – started to take-n’-give between each other in very little time. By the end of the Han dynasty, phrases like “*san jiao* (three teachings)” already appeared. Inspired by Buddhist practice, Daoist followers designated the mystic figure Laozi as its top founding sage and constructed temples to conduct their worshipping. Those *fangshi* of alchemists, astrologers, diviners, exorcists, and geomancers, gradually stopped their free-citing of Confucian Classics and started transforming themselves into Daoist priests. After the fall of the Han, Daoism and Buddhism kept competing in charming China’s cultural elite and royal rulers for another six centuries, whereas Confucianism grew steadily through its institutional bases within the State. During the Tang times (618-904), the three, while holding distinctive positions and attacking each other fiercely, served alternately as the top official discourses legitimating mandate to power for rulers.<sup>13</sup>

All three “teachings” kept on playing legitimating functions in a mixed fashion for ruling houses throughout imperial China, up to the 1911 Republican Revolution. But overall, Confucianism became more and more dominant in mainstream politics. Buddhism encountered sustained persecution by the end of the Tang period. As for Daoism, previously blending together philosophy and religion, its two components fell apart after the Tang, with Daoist philosophy being endorsed and treasured by Confucian literati, and Daoist religion serving

11 Scholars of Confucianism may think Dong Zhongshu took in Daoist elements and further developed Confucianism; e.g. Zhang Hao, “Politics and Teaching – Unified or in Duality?”, pp. 120-23. However, scholars of Daoism may see Dong Zhongshu and his New Text Confucianism as essentially Daoism with a thin Confucianist disguise. See, for instance, Lü Xichen, *Daoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*, pp. 94-106.

12 Lü Xichen, *Daoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*, pp. 134-57. Dong Zhongshu’s Confucianism is based on “New Text” version of the Classics, written in a relatively recent script; it fashioned extensive mystic interpretations of the Classics, in contrast to the “Old text” Confucian school that studied the Classics written in an earlier script and emphasized philological approach.

13 The Tang emperors, the first two in particular, held Daoism to be the top legitimating doctrine for their dynasty. See Lü Xichen, *Taoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*, pp. 158-75. In mid Tang under Empress Wu (624-705; rein 690-705), Buddhism replaced Daoism for the same function. In mid eighth century, Xuanzong (rein 712-756) promoted meritocratic Confucianism.

the court at one end and layman communities at the other. When Confucianism lost its prestige during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) under the Mongol rule, Buddhism and Daoism would have another round of intense competition, with Buddhism holding the upper hand. However, viewed in longer term, neither of the two managed to establish a country-wide institutional base.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, a well-organized base within the State's bureaucratic institution is one of the most important factors in Confucianism's continued expansion, even when it was not yet as dominant or prominent – or not yet exclusively so – in politics, culture, or elite intellectual life as the Han policy's turn might have suggested. It would be a myth to say that religious Confucianism had always dominated Chinese civilization before the twentieth century.

### A Sage not a Deity, Mediated via State Apparatus

Throughout some two thousand years, imperial dynasties in China worshiped Heaven as the source of their ruling mandate. Nonetheless, how the Heavenly Mandate may be mediated to a ruling house went through many changes, as the “three teachings” of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism coexisted and competed for royal favor since the later Han. Roughly speaking, except for the Qing (1644-1911), all the dynasties that lasted more than a hundred years relied explicitly on Daoism to establish legitimacy when setting up a new ruling house.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Confucianism was emphasized mostly for consolidating worldly order thereafter. Many emperors ordered the construction of temples for one or the other of the “three teachings”. Both Daoism and Buddhism retained their own gods and deities, but Confucianism was peculiar in this regard. While insisting on the order of Heaven, Earth, and ancestral hierarchy as the end in life, it does not have a reserved spot in this order for Confucius himself. He was regarded not as a deity but a sage.

The secondary place Confucius occupied in the eyes of religiously observant emperors can be seen in numerous examples. For instance, when the Confucius's shrine in his hometown received royal offerings during the Han, the Daoist deity Laozi was worshipped by emperors in ceremonies devoted to the Heaven at royal altar in the capital. When the Tang emperor Xuanzong (685-762) ordered dozens of Confucius' disciples to be included in Confucian temple, it was done to counter the influence of Buddhism, a top favor for several royal rulers prior to Xuanzong. Over time, Confucius received many glorifying titles from various emperors. But we need to remember that similar titles were also given to monarchs and their worthy aids. For earlier dynasties and from time to time, Daoist deities would receive even grander titles than Confucius. In fact, worshipping rites

14 Hymes examines different patterns in the relationship between the court and Daoist priests from outside the capitals in Northern and Southern Song; He also studies how Daoist deities being perceived in local society. Hymes, *Way and Byway*, pp. 175-82.

15 Lü Xichen, *Daoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*.



designated to Confucius were never ranked the highest in imperial China and Confucianists did never fight for that treatment, either, until the very end of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

If weak in legitimating ability, Confucianism nonetheless took to itself the duty of safeguarding the “Heavenly” (in reality, the earthly) order. It held social hierarchy as the most sacred in ritual arrangements as well. A Confucian temple, therefore, could not be opened to the public in the same way as Daoist or Buddhist temples. It would open to the educated literati for sacrificial ceremonies only, held twice annually and usually presided over by top officials in a given locality. Its servitude nature can be seen in the fact that the emperor rarely followed this rule to preside the annual events personally in the capital. Unlike Daoism or Buddhism, Confucian worship in imperial China could not be turned into a community-based religious practice, either. Its “public-ness” was intrinsically linked to the bureaucratic state. For community welfare or individual fulfillment, a commoner or even a local official would have to locate Daoist deities to present her or his sincere offering.<sup>17</sup> It would be a myth to claim Confucius as a popular deity in imperial China.

On the other hand, ancestral worship and filial piety, two values upheld dearly by Confucianism, went a long way to re-converge. Filial piety tales from the post-Han period already absorbed religious influence from Daoism and Buddhism, especially in punitive terms in a terrifying hell for offenders.<sup>18</sup> Daoists and Buddhists, arguing with *lixue* Confucianists (see below) in the Song times, would freely acknowledge the importance for common mortals to be filial to parents and loyal to emperor. Following the Song and along with economic commercialization, a downward spreading “secularization” effect took place in valuing these ideas. Wealthy commoners started to set up their own kinship shrines. The trend was eventually recognized by the imperial center in the sixteenth century, when bans forbidding commoners from worshipping their own ancestors were eventually lifted.<sup>19</sup> Confucianism played an important role in the process. In addition to persuasion, however, it was also armed with legal weapons. Qu Tongzu argues that China’s legal system experienced a Confucianization process. Following scattered practices for several centuries, legal codes adapted patriarchal principles explicitly for the first time during the Tang. Later dynasties followed suit. Eventually, law-sanctioned patriarchal priority reached its culmination under the Ming and Qing.<sup>20</sup> Confucian bureaucrats were the executor of the law through-

16 The sacrificial rank for Confucius was raised from secondary to primary in 1906 only, obviously a modernizing attempt instead of part of long-held tradition. Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy of the Qing Dynasty*, pp. 101-5, 112-4.

17 Cf. Hymes, *Way and Byway*, pp. 19-21, 138-46; Jiang Yonglin, *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*, pp. 142-74.

18 Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under-Heaven with Filial Piety*, p. 77; pp. 42-51, 150-58.

19 Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under-Heaven with Filial Piety*, pp. 21-24.

20 Qu Tongzu (T’ung-tsu Ch’u), *Law and Society in Traditional China*, Paris, Mouton Co., 1961, pp. 274-79, quoted in Qu, “Continuity and changes of the Qing statutes,” pp. 392-93.

out the centuries. Here we encounter another constructed myth that claims Confucianism as the backbone of Chinese culture and at the same time conceals its bureaucratic roots in the legal and administrative apparatuses of the State.

### Reviving Amid “Secularization”

Confucianism did not occupy a predominantly mainstream position in Chinese society until the Song times (Northern, 960-1127; Southern, 1127-1279). Its rise came together with fundamental changes in society and was accompanied by a proto-secularization of socio-cultural life in general. It went through its own reincarnation as well, adapting into a new form that was known primarily as “*Da-oxue*” (the learning of Dao) before the 16th century and as the “*Song-Ming lixue*” (the learning of [Heavenly] pattern-principle) thereafter. In English, it is known as the Song-Ming “neo-Confucianism.” As we can see, an obvious split in its reference is between “teaching” (*jiao*) and “learning-studying” (*xue*). Secularizing strands of the neo-Confucianism coexisted and struggled with its religious aspects for a long time, a fact that has often been overlooked by Confucian advocates today.

The Tang-Song dynastic transition (roughly the 9th to 10th century) saw the decline of hereditary aristocracy, when a landed gentry class rose in number and influence. Institutional reforms consolidated the trend. Following the steps of the Tang, the Song further centralized the State, experimented taxation reforms, and expanded existing civil service examinations considerably. For the first time, the examinations became the core instrument for governmental recruitment. Also for the first time, examination contents prioritized the Five Classics of ancient scriptures for all candidates.<sup>21</sup> While opening up opportunities for commoners to climb up, the examination system also became the backbone of the State’s bureaucratization. Educated literati-bureaucrats of the late Tang already started pondering about the nature of being a *ru* and its connection to Dao – the Way that gives meaning to the world.<sup>22</sup> By the Song times, *Daoxue* thinkers argued for their positions through intense debates not only against Buddhism but also among themselves, such as those between Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) *lixue* (learning of [Heavenly] pattern-principle) and Lu Jiuyuan’s (1139-1193) *xinxue* (learning of mind-heart).

The vigorous debates indicate an ongoing negotiation of the neo-Confucianism with its immediate environment that conditioned its ascendancy historically. In fact, it was not until after Zhu Xi’s death that his *lixue* version of Confucianism

21 Fu Xuancong, *Tangdai keju yu wenxue* (Civil examination and literature in Tang Dynasty), Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1986. Miyazaki Ichisada, *China’s Examination Hell*.

22 Peter K. Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, Stanford University Press, 1992, pp. 123-47.

was eventually sanctioned by the Southern Song court.<sup>23</sup> The succeeding Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279-1366) recognized its influence among Han ethnic communities, and so did the following Ming (1366-1644) and Qing (1644-1911). Its orthodox position lasted for seven centuries in the late imperial China. On the other hand and from a religious perspective, the Song debates represent the need for Confucian promoters to exercise intellectual persuasion intensively, a marker of the secularizing character in the new development. Despite varied positions or arguments within the doctrine, therefore, many modern scholars regard the “neo-Confucianism” collectively as the ideology of a rising gentry class of land-owning *shumin* (commoners).<sup>24</sup>

In debating with Buddhism, the Song neo-Confucianism explicated its secular leaning and at the same time developed its own sophisticated answer to challenging issues in human life. On one hand, neo-Confucianists attacked Buddhism for preaching individual salvation at all costs, withdrawing from not only earthly desires but also worldly duties. This is to be indifferent to one’s father, against filial piety; and is to disregard one’s ruler, against the virtue of loyalty. In contrast to Buddhism, Zhu Xi’s theoretical elucidation placed *tianli* (Heavenly pattern-principle) behind existing social order of centralized imperial rule and patriarchal kinship. Thus, the reason to control earthly desires has to be for the purpose to uphold the Heavenly pattern-principle (*cun tianli, mie renyu*). If the concept of *tian* (Heaven) represents an absolute authority that is omnipresent while unpredictable, *tianli* (Heavenly pattern-principle) points to Reason and rationality in *tian*’s connection to our world.

On the other hand, the Song neo-Confucianists granted increasing importance to human agency. In Zhu Xi’s theory, Heavenly pattern-principle bestows essence to everyone and everything in the world. But it does so in varied ways according to circumstances. To uncover the somewhat buried essence, one must follow the guidance of Confucius the Sage, to study in sincerity and engage in continuous self-cultivation.<sup>25</sup> Pushing the absolute imperial order to the background, this construction opened up theoretical space for active interventions by the individual, the non-aristocratic kinship, and the village-community, in an ideal moral world. The leading figures of the Song neo-Confucianism almost all devised their own household instruction manuals as a way to lead a ritualized moral life, away from their service to the State. Some in the Southern Song (1127-1279) also worked out village agreement for local communities.<sup>26</sup>

To support his position, Zhu Xi promoted the Four Books as the primary Con-

23 Cf., Hoyt Tillman, *Confucian Discourse and Zhu Xi’s Ascendancy*.

24 Bol, *This Culture of Ours*, pp. 301-342; Miyazaki Ichisada, “The Modern of East Asia;” Yu Ying-shih, *The Historical World of Zhu Xi*.

25 Araki Kengo (Huangmu Jianwu), *Buddhism and Confucianism*, pp. 132-257, esp. 177-87.

26 The Northern and Southern Song differ in their social orientations, as the former being centered in the capital whereas the latter in local communities. This could be one of the socio-historical conditions that supported Zhu Xi’s position. E.g., Hymes, *Way and Byway*, pp. 15-18; 114-46.

fucian reader. Unlike the Five Classics that were ancient texts before Confucius's time, the Four Books were understood to be Confucius's own teaching and by some of his earliest disciples. And, unlike the Five Classics that are about Sage-kings of the Golden Antiquity, the Four Books represented the best example and guideline for later generations to follow the footsteps of Confucius as a Sage-teacher. In this intellectualizing action, Zhu Xi interpreted the concept Heavenly Mandate (*tianming*) with a focus on individual self-cultivation. By grasping the essence of Heavenly pattern-principle, one will be able to perfect the self and recognize one's own Heavenly Mandate, just as Confucius once did. While moving the concept of Heavenly Mandate away from imperial sovereignty, neo-Confucianism elevated the idea of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*) in political sphere. A main feature of these shifts was to skip those questions directly linking to the divine (Heaven) and issues concerning imperial legitimacy (Heavenly Mandate). Instead, the focus was on harmonizing the human realm (Heavenly pattern-principle and all-under-Heaven).<sup>27</sup>

This does not mean that the concept of Heavenly Mandate disappeared from Chinese political life. On the contrary, it was picked up repeatedly by peasant uprisings challenging the ruling court. Rebels' claims to Heavenly Mandate were often supported by Daoism, Buddhism, sometimes by mixtures of the two, and in one case even by Christianity (the Taiping Rebellion of the mid nineteenth century). Neo-Confucianism played little role in these uprisings. The Song-Ming conceptual shifts did not make it a real threat to the imperial State.

### Ascending to Orthodoxy

Neo-Confucianism eventually ascended to become the orthodoxy in late imperial China in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Its position was almost guaranteed by the civil service examination system, but its actual path was loaded with conflicts. Initially the ruling house and the Confucian scholar-officials worked together against Buddhism and Daoism. But soon contradictions internal to the neo-Confucianism came to the surface. By the end, the Ming witnessed one of the rockiest relationships between a royal house and its educated scholar-officials in Chinese history. A new balance was reached only in the Qing dynasty.

Crucial but often overlooked, Confucianism's orthodoxy position since the fourteenth century was secured through legal instruments of the State. The *Great Ming Code* (Da Ming lilü), issued in 1397 and modeled after by the Qing three centuries later, was the hitherto most comprehensively Confucianized

27 Zhu Xi's philosophy is far more sophisticated than what is summarized here, rather crudely. The purpose of this paper's summary is to figure out the religious implications of Zhu Xi's formulation of "Heaven" related concepts. For more comprehensive studies on Zhu Xi, the reader may consult, for example, works by Tillman and Yu Ying-shih, cited earlier, and Julia Ching's *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

statute document, especially on two central issues - human connection to *tian* the Heaven; and patriarchal order within the family. On both issues, the code targeted Daoism and Buddhism for political reasons, benefitting Confucianism at the same time. In establishing his new dynasty, the founding emperor of the Ming appealed to both Buddhism and Daoism to claim the Heavenly Mandate.<sup>28</sup> However, to stop others from repeating his victorious story, the *Great Ming Code* granted the emperor exclusive rights to holding sacrificial ceremonies to Heaven and Earth, prohibiting Buddhist and Daoist priests from divinizing activities that would appeal directly to Heaven the transcendental authority. Number and location of monasteries were to be controlled by the State; and so was ordination of priests and nuns, to be regulated in ways parallel to the Confucianist civil service examinations.<sup>29</sup>

Another battlefield was over the mind-heart of the masses, where the Ming rulers once again found Confucian position to be more favorable than either Buddhism or Daoism. The founding emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) penned treaties personally on the "three teachings" (*san jiao*), emphasizing similarities between the three, especially in terms of filial piety. The *Great Ming Code* specified punishment for Buddhist and Daoist converts who would disregard their filial duties because of their religious faith. Meanwhile, although Zhu Yuanzhang trusted Daoist priests for his own fortune, when it came to questions of guiding his subjects, he recognized the usefulness of the Confucian method - to indoctrinate the masses with moral teaching. Soon after taking the throne, he issued a Sacred Edict, to be publicized in towns across the country on regular basis. Using plain, simple language, the edit delivered six moral admonitions, all based on Confucian positions: filial to parents; deferent to older generations; friendly with neighbors; dutiful in guiding children; content with one's own lot; and avoiding troublemaking.<sup>30</sup>

The emperor's active intervention in "teaching" the masses exposed the awkward position of Confucian "learning" and that of the moral authority of Confucius as a Sage-teacher, both emphasized by Zhu Xi's theory. Following Confucius, the Song neo-Confucianism adhered to the idea that a mystic "Three Dynasties" of a distant Antiquity represented the golden model for all later generations. The lineage coming from this ideal past was one of Sage-kings. A Sage-king was to stand for unified authority in morality and politics and occupies the central spot of all-under-Heaven, radiating his energy to every corner of the world. In this understanding, it would be difficult for any living Confucian scholars to actually claim moral authority over the throne. However, once the Four Books were elevated to scripture position, the semi-sacred lineage was extended to the Sage-

28 Jiang Yonglin, *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*, University of Washington Press, 2001, pp. 3-17.

29 Jiang Yonglin, "Controlling Popular Religious Rituals" in *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code*, pp. 81-87, esp. pp. 81-82.

30 Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under-Heaven with Filial Piety*, p. 37. Lü Xichen, *Daoism, Fangshi, and Dynastic Politics*.

teachers of Confucius himself and his most favored followers, who were never political rulers. The extension created a *Daotong*, a genealogy of Dao that was related to Confucian "learning".<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the Ming founder emphasized a genealogy of rulers, *zhitong*. He set up a Temple of Historical Rulers (*Lidai diwang miao*) that worshipped not only the mythical Sage-kings revered by Confucius, as previous dynasties used to do, but also the founding emperors of all major dynasties in history after Confucius's time.<sup>32</sup>

The two genealogies were in obvious conflict. Yet, they both remained within the neo-Confucian tradition, lending imperial power opportunities to manipulate. As Zhang Hao points out, by conferring super-moralistic power to "emperor" in its abstract sense, the Song-Ming neo-Confucianism retained its religious side that often went to contradict its secularizing side of intellectual reasoning.<sup>33</sup> The internal contradiction can be seen clearly in the dispute over granting honorary titles to Confucius. Along with Confucianism's ascending, imperial rulers since the mid Tang granted Confucius various titles, often including the designator for "king" (*wang*). However, as ideological conflict escalated between ruler and "scholar-master" over moral authority in the mid Ming, the emperor at the time stripped the maker of "king" from Confucius's official title for sacrificial ceremony, on the ground that, since Confucius was never a king in his life time, to grant him the title would be an action of usurp. Those who argued for retaining the marker were promptly removed from their official posts. Contentions lasted throughout the dynasty, often intermingled with bloody political struggles.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the lasting conflict, most of the Ming emperors were not as vigilant over religious matters as their dynastic founding father. Many detailed statutes in the *Great Ming Code* were not carefully observed by the end of the dynasty. Socio-economic development came together with growing liveliness in cultural life, especially along the wealthy southeast coast, speeding up downward flow of cultural norms into local communities and encouraging dissent thinking within Confucian traditions. On one hand, as mentioned earlier, scholar-officials petitioned the court successfully to lift the traditional ban on commoners to set up private altar for their ancestors. A related phenomenon is to pray at family altar to five spiritual authorities: Heaven, Earth, Ruler-sovereign, Parents, and Master-teacher (*tian-di-jun-qin-shi*). The list has its ancient origins in both Confucianism

31 Zhang Hao, "Politics and Teaching – Unified or in Duality?" *Reflexion*20, pp. 111-143. Zhu Xi's construction has the golden age of Chinese antiquity ruled by Sage-kings, who embodied both Dao-lineage and ruling lineage in a unity. See Zhang Hao, p. 126; pp. 129-30.

32 Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy of the Qing Dynasty*, p. 79. The Ming omitted most short-lived dynasties, as well as dynasties under supposedly non-Han ethnic rulers, such as the Yuan that was ruled by Mongols.

33 Zhang Hao, "Politics and Teaching - In Unity or Duality?", pp. 132-38.

34 See, for example, Benjamin Elman, "Where is King Ch'eng: Confucian Civil Examinations and Imperial Ideology During the Early Ming Dynasty, 1368-1415," *T'oung Pao* 74, no. 1 (1993): 23-68; Ray Huang, *1587, a Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*, Yale University Press, 1981; and Mizoguchi Yuzo, *Transformation of Ideas in Early Modern China*.

and Daoism. Local religious groups, such as peasant uprising, often appropriate it for their own purpose. But mainstream opinions always took it to be part of Confucian teaching.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, internal challengers to Zhu Xi's doctrine of the neo-Confucianism became more outspoken than before, sometimes even commanding massive following from cross-regional areas. Wang Yangming (1472-1529), Li Zhi (1527-1602), and Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) were the outstanding examples in this regard. Their ideas started to break the emperor-centered position of Zhu Xi's political philosophy; to further explore the potential of individual human agency, in connection to the origin of truth and knowledge; and to imagine a bottom-up, community-based socio-political ideal. These thinkers provided invaluable resources of dissenting, within while enriching the tradition of Confucianism. However, their efforts were not strong enough to change the general trends that the neo-Confucianism would take under the Qing.<sup>36</sup>

### The Qing that Shaped Modern Confucianism

The Qing ruled the "China proper" by adapting to a political framework left by the Ming (1368-1644).<sup>37</sup> Despite violent conquest and forced change of identity, such as in dressing code, socio-political continuity remained strong in the dynastic transition. In fact, major institutions under the Qing - the legal code and the civil service examinations in particular - were all further consolidated based on Confucian principles of grand unity, centralized rule, and patriarchal hierarchy.<sup>38</sup> As a result, both Daoism and Chinese Buddhism (not to be mixed with Tibetan Buddhism) experienced sharp decline, even though some Manchu rulers had great interest in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>39</sup> Although the Qing was ruled by an ethnic minority, Confucian social order appeared to have reached its most stable state in China's long history. How was it possible? What were the implications of the phenomena?

Coming from the Siberia region and with a relatively weak tradition in its political culture, the Manchu were eager learners of their neighboring civilizations. Ancestral worshipping with ethnic Han influence was practiced seriously

35 Yu Ying-shih, "The origins of the 'Heaven-earth-sovereign-parent-master' order". Xu Zi, "The origins and changes of the 'Heaven-earth-sovereign-parent-master' order."

36 For Wang Yangming, see Araki Kengo, *Buddism and Confucianism*, pp. 258-308. For Li Zhi and Huang Zongxi, see Mizoguchi Yuzo, *Transformation of Ideas in Early Modern China*, pp. 51-170, 234-52.

37 The Qing ruled large areas dominated by the Mongols, the Tibetans, the Uyghur, and other non-Han ethnic groups, over which the Ming did not have power. The Manchu's control in these areas was aided by various religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism or Islam. The phrase "China proper," used here for sake of convenience, indicates territorial regions where the Ming did have control.

38 With exceptions, such as the armed forces that the Manchu retained absolute grip on. Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

39 Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy of the Qing Dynasty*, pp. 117-163.

decades before the Manchu army took Beijing. Once organized resistances were put down (often bloodily) in “China proper”, the Manchu emperors tended to explain their own victory against the fall of the Ming in Confucian terminologies. To themselves, it was the blessing of Heaven, Earth, and their Manchu ancestors. To the Chinese society at large, the Ming would be blamed for straying away from proper Confucian practice and causing its own demise.

In ritual practice, the Manchu emperors outperformed all previous dynasties in their observance of ritual protocols set by books on rites in the Confucian Classics. Altars to Heaven (*tiantan*), ancestry (*taimiao*), the State (*sheji*), and Temple of Confucius (*wenmiao*) in Beijing, taken from the Ming rulers, maintained and sometimes remodeled, were visited by the Manchu emperors at a much higher rate on average than emperors from all the other dynasties.<sup>40</sup> But this does not mean they would willingly concede their cultural authority to rival forces. And, unlike the Ming that must deal with Buddhism and Daoism at its founding moment, the Manchu conquerors recognized that the major challenge to their rule would come from the Confucian literati class. Precisely in this respect the Qing learned most from its immediate predecessor. Specifically, the new rulers’ ruthless military campaigns were accompanied by great effort to minimize institutional disruptions and to rebuild patriarchal principle as the backbone for social order.<sup>41</sup>

Despite armed and unarmed resistances led by Han literati-gentry class, the Qing reopened the civil examinations in 1645, merely a year after promulgating its rule in “China proper.” Twelve years later, the court issued its first royal edition of the *Xiaojing* (The classic of filial piety). Three years later in 1659, this particular book became required reading for the civil examinations, after being absent for the entire Ming period.<sup>42</sup> Following the example of the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang, the Manchu emperors Kangxi (reign 1661-1722) issued his own version of “Sacred Edict” (*Shengyu*) of moral admonitions. When the Yongzheng Emperor succeeded his father (reign 1723-1735), he revised the Sacred Edict—filial piety was a top priority in both versions. He also issued a new version of the *Classic of Filial Piety*, more accessible to common people.<sup>43</sup> Along with ideological promotion came efforts to make patriarchal clans the solid rock for the dynastic rule. In fact, as a measure of self-protection, local clans already grew into the basic social unit in China’s agricultural society during the Ming. The socio-administrative role for large rural clans became more clarified under the Qing. In many places, clan organization took over local “community,” to be in charge of managing social welfare and security; running clan school; exercising kinship rules in place of official laws; and collecting taxes and fees to hand over to the government as a

40 Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy of the Qing Dynasty*, pp. 38-39, 61-65, 73-100.

41 Frederic Wakeman, *The Great Enterprise*.

42 Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under Heaven with Filial Piety*, pp. 37-39, 78-95.

43 Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under Heaven with Filial Piety*, pp. 37-39, 214-19.



collective unit.<sup>44</sup>

To highlight his position, Yongzheng made the Sacred Edict a strict requirement for popular education, to be recited in public twice a month by local officials and tested for all primary level examination candidates. The measure lasted throughout the Qing dynasty. Meanwhile and for the first time in history, five ancestors along Confucius's family lineage were brought out from obscurity, each bestowed by the Manchu throne a grand title containing the designator of "king," supposedly in recognition to their unusually joined achievement to bring about a Sage into this world. Conspicuously, Confucius himself was not granted this disputed marker. Noticeably, it was in his decree to honor Confucius ancestors that Yongzheng became the first emperor officially confirmed the five spiritual authorities and their proper order – Heaven, Earth, Sovereign-ruler, parents, and master-teacher.<sup>45</sup>

These measures had profound implications. First of all, moral values inherent to Confucianism were now preached according to the Sacred Edict, instead of the Five Classics or the Four Books. In this arrangement, the emperor would speak directly to the masses, assuming an enlarged role of a Heaven-endorsed ruler in the image of a fatherly-figure, as well as a guiding light leading people to civilized life, in the model of the Sage-kings of the Golden Antiquity. A commoner had indeed acquired the rights to worship Heaven and Earth directly, maybe plus Confucius. But, the Heaven and Earth in this setting were not accessed unmediated; and the mediating agency was the ruling emperor himself alone. With no direct access to specially designated sacrificial rituals, a commoner's relationship to Heaven and Earth became instead a private matter, losing its sacredness in religious life of one's immediate community.<sup>46</sup>

Same logic was at work in literati members' worship of Confucius. By legal code and ritual protocols, filial piety took priority over Confucius's Sage-teacher's position in the Qing. The "master-teacher" fell behind the other four spiritual authorities. The Dao genealogy, conceptualized by Zhu Xi, lost its battle with the ruler's genealogy. Indeed, during the Qing, the ruler's genealogy grew denser than before. Understandably, it included non-Han ruling houses. Furthermore, by Qianlong's time (reign 1736-1795), all emperors and kings who once ruled in historical "China" were to be worshipped at the Temple of Historical Rulers. Qianlong explained his view on the matter several times. He insisted that a ruler's title

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44 The setting was not stable. For example, Qianlong once ran a campaign to crush local clan powers in Jiangxi Province. Lü Miaw-fen, *Ruling All-under-Heaven with Filial Piety*, pp. 27-34. For law practice with the Qing code, see Qu Tongzu.

45 Previously, only Confucius's father was recognized. Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy in Qing Dynasty*, pp. 101-112. Xu Zi, "The origins and changes of the 'Heaven-earth-sovereign-parent-master' order."

46 For example, Norman Kutcher believes that, by the end of the 18th century, funeral had become more and more a personal matter to be handled privately, shrinking from its previous public implications in local community as it used to in the late Ming. Lü Miaw-fen disagrees and points to ambiguous spaces between monarchical and patriarchal powers. Quoted in Lü, *Ruling All-under-Heaven with Filial Piety*, pp. 218-29.

alone was enough to qualify for inclusion. It ought to be different from adding worthy "saints" into Confucius Temple, when the worthiness must be evaluated and debated by officials in charge of the shrine. Moreover, appropriating an ancient saying, Qianlong argued against racial discrimination towards non-Han rulers, claiming that the all-under-Heaven belongs to peoples of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia zhe tianxia ren zhi tianxia ye*). The appropriation's stress is not on "people" versus ruler but on rulers from various "peoples" to be justly accepted to rule all-under-Heaven.<sup>47</sup> After a hundred years under the Manchu rule, it is indicative that the Qing scholar-gentry class, unlike its counterpart during the Ming, had a very weak position to lay competing moral claims against imperial rulers.

Moreover, literati-gentry class also had a much weaker link to their own Sage, Confucius, than the Song-Ming neo-Confucianists. It is true that the Qing emperors paid tribute to Confucius more regularly than rulers in previous dynasties. However, before the twentieth century, sacrificial ceremonies offered to Confucius were always ranked at secondary level (except in the rare occasions when emperors held top-rank ceremony for Confucius at the shrine in his hometown). Throughout the Qing, all the Manchu emperors were clear and firm that they alone represented the highest unity under Heaven, unifying both ruling and teaching. Once spiritual authorities were centralized to the throne, intellectual life lost its organic role in society's public life, reducing independent spirit and critical energy among literati members. The merged genealogies became a closed issue, leaving no theoretical ambiguity for literati thinkers to maneuver in the same way by which Wang Yangming and his followers did in the late Ming.<sup>48</sup>

In the religious life of a Confucianist, the situation was probably unique to the Qing. To become a scholar-official or scholar-gentry, one must study by heart the Classics according to the officially sanctioned line of interpretation, which was primarily based on Zhu Xi's theory. However, upon becoming the only member in society with this scripture education, the newly minted scholar-gentleman was not qualified to preach openly, unless he had passed higher ranks of the civil service examinations and was appointed to government positions. Even then, he could only preach the Sacred Edict or other "sacred" texts issued by the emperor. Learning would not guarantee one's moral authority even within family life, because there, backed by law, ruling priority depended on patriarchal hierarchy. "Teaching" and "learning" were torn apart during the Qing, with the throne claiming the former and Confucian scholars specializing on the later. "Learning" was resulted partly from internal secularization; but without challenging the "teaching" power, it was not armed with secularism, a regressive problem that seriously affected the fate of Confucianism in the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup>

47 Quoted in Yu Benyuan, *Religion Policy of the Qing Dynasty*, pp. 87-88.

48 Zhang Hao, "Ruling and Teaching – in Unity or Duality?", *Reflexion*20.

49 Cf. Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge,

## Making Confucianism a Popular Religion for Today?

If we say that Confucianism was a religion, or *the* religion, in imperial China, with its own deities, scriptures, temples, and sacrificial rituals, which lasted for more than two thousands years without changing its essence, then the most extraordinary thing in modern Chinese history would be the sudden collapse of a Confucian socio-political order and the fall of Confucianism from its pedestal. The civil service examination system, a major pillar in the Confucian order, was abolished abruptly in 1905, in an entirely non-ceremonial fashion. Confucianism's changing fate has prompted scholars to ask many questions. Joseph Levenson believes that it had lost vitality long ago, making the newly arriving Western learning increasingly more attractive to China's most lively minds; and that educated Chinese kept talking about Confucianism mainly out of sentimental association to the past, not based on rational thinking. Mark Elwin, on the other hand, compares Confucianism to other great religions of the world and sees the collapse of scriptural Confucianism already coming before the twentieth century. The scriptures' relative lack of sacredness is shown in the willful reading of Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and his contemporaries.<sup>50</sup>

Compared to the civil service examination, the legal system, another institutional pillar of the late imperial Confucianism, did not begin to change until well after the 1911 Republican Revolution. When change did come, it encountered strong resistance from the gentry class in local rural communities and had to go in a piecemeal fashion, often limiting its reform to big urban centers. It took a Communist revolution (1949) to make patriarchal hierarchy a target of legal reform and gender equality a social principle protected by law. The relatively slow social transformation, compared to the sudden turn-round in culture-related institutions, often lent support to conservative claims that Chinese society had its "nature" in Confucianism. However, Confucian activists in the twentieth century did not always side with conservative forces to oppose against modernization projects. Partly due to the teaching-learning split in the Qing, modern Confucian advocates came mostly from the old "learning" camp and tended to support modern rationalization, while arguing for a modernized Confucianism. Popular Confucianism is a new phenomenon in the twenty-first century.

### From Kang Youwei to New-Confucianism

From Kang Youwei's time onwards, many educated Chinese embraced new ideas coming from the West enthusiastically, but there were always others

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Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984. For contemporary reference, see Ji Zhe, "Secularization without Secularism."

50 Joseph R Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, University of California Press, 1958-1965. Mark Elwin, "The Collapse of Scriptural Confucianism." *Papers on Far Eastern History*, Camberra (March 1990) 41: 45-77.

who wondered and worried about the same problem--the relevance of Confucianism to modern world, and its sudden collapse in the early twentieth century. More often than not, ideas introduced from abroad would trigger new understandings of life back home.

Despite his peculiar way of reading Confucian Classics, Kang Youwei always identified Confucianism with "China" and its future prosperity. His effort to elevate Confucianism to China's national religion went hand in hand with his emphasis that Confucian tradition valued thinking with reason and so was compatible to scientific knowledge introduced from the West. Meanwhile, he insisted that a meaningful national identity could only be built on the basis of Confucianism and Confucianism was indispensable for inculcating morality in society. As Gan Chunsong points out, these goals often went contradicting each other, as well as frequently in conflicts with conservative and republican positions. Kang's promotion of religious Confucianism was not always due to his religious conviction but for the purpose of constructing cultural and national identity.<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that Kang had also been active in debating China's modern state, arguing for constitutional monarchy before the 1911 revolution and later on in the new Republic for "State sovereignty" (*zhuquan zai guo*), supported by Confucianism and in contrast to Republican idea of popular sovereignty (*zhuquan zai min*).<sup>52</sup> Kang's efforts were not very fruitful in reality. He ended up in becoming a religious leader of a small sect that did not bear Confucian marker in its name any more. With changing institutional settings, religious Confucianism retreated to become a minor faction with limited following throughout the century.

Many intellectuals like Kang responded actively to vacuums left by drastic reforms, covering a wide range of issues. Of these, a focal point was moral-ethical cultivation that was central to the Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. Starting with metaphysical emphasis in the late Qing, the issue went to two separate directions soon after the May Fourth New Culture Movement of the late 1910s. One turned to moral inculcation of school pupils, provoking repeated political rows. Contentious parties tend to argue that inculcation should be eliminated from modern education; or that teaching school children would be the best way - possibly the last way, too - to preserve our traditional culture. As such, the arguments do not always form meaningful dialogue between the parties. It has been a tenacious problem. Dispute over the Four Books' inclusion into high school curriculum is still going on in Taiwan today.<sup>53</sup>

The other direction became the intellectual Confucianism of our time, known as *xin rujia* (New-Confucianism), which concentrates its energy on constructing metaphysical theories within the perimeters of neo-Confucianism.

51 Gan Chunsong, "Between Knowledge and Faith: Kang Youwei and the Modern Fate of Confucianism."

52 Zhang Yongle, *The Remaking of an Old Country, 1911-1917*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011, pp. 82-149.

53 Cf. *Sixiang 21: Bixu du Sishu?* (Reflexion21: Must we read the Four Books?), Taipei, May, 2012.

Formed in a period of great intellectual upheavals and going through years of wars and revolutions, the earlier representatives of this school were often active in public affairs or involved in politics. When the Communist forces took power in the mainland China in 1949, most of them stayed. But some of their outstanding disciples of a younger generation fled to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or other countries. Persistent endeavor by these refugee-scholars, including their own students, was crucial to Confucian revival phenomena thereafter.<sup>54</sup> They have managed to retain intellectual prestige for modern Confucianism, making it a strong contender in offering sophisticated explanations about China, Chinese culture and civilization, or history and society, as well as about that of East Asia at large.

One particular incident became “a landmark for the Contemporary New Confucianism Movement”. On New Year Day, 1958, four leading New Confucianism figures published a document, entitled “A Manifesto for a Reappraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture”. The manifesto was originally envisaged for English-speaking audience, targeting Sinology field in the West for its arrogantly disregarding Chinese opinions. However, due to changing circumstances, the document was published in Chinese only by the end.<sup>55</sup> There is no question that Orientalism had (and likely still have) its fair share in China-study field in the West. But at the same time, the manifesto also indicated an anxiety among its signatories over cultural identity, which was provoked through increasing contact with the outside world. Unlike Kang Youwei’s campaigns that concentrated on China’s domestic institutions, the manifesto was intended to urge the outside world to recognize the need of demarcating boundaries between different cultures. It aimed at constructing China’s own cultural identity by speaking to audiences outside its own cultural tradition.

The four signatories were based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States at the time. The issuing date fell into a peak period of the Cold War tensions, especially military tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Although the manifesto mentioned no contemporary political affairs, it set a precedent in its apologetic tone when discussing democratization potentials in a society dominated by Confucian culture.<sup>56</sup> The reference was clearly Chiang Kai-shek’s government in Taiwan, with its prolonged martial law and oppressive “white terror”. For the manifesto signers and many of their students, it became imperative to acknowledge modern necessity of political democracy while defending Confucian norms in Chinese political culture.

In fact, the manifesto did not generate much interest East or West at the time. The New Confucianism was an isolated phenomenon in the postwar

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54 Liu Shuxian, “Contemporary New Confucianism: Background, Varieties, and Significance,” *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, pp. 91-109.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 104-8.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-7.

period. Things started to change in the 1970s, partly affected by two historical factors. On one hand, attacks on Confucianism in the Cultural Revolution provoked growing interest on the PRC and Confucianism in the West. On the other hand, several East Asian countries saw rapid economic take-off since the 1960s, prompting interest to detect their shared cultural traits. Confucianism easily became the top candidate in offering explanations. Thereupon, philosophical-spiritual Confucianism joined force with observation-based historical, political, or anthropological analyses. As mentioned earlier, it was this trend that brought Confucianism back to the mainland to popular attention in the eighties. However, as the explanations appeared relatively foreign in comparison to personally lived experience in the PRC, the excitement soon ebbed.

### Cultural Identity and Chinese Uniqueness

According to Chen Ming, a leading figure in today's Confucianism revival wave, when he was inspired by the New Confucianism and set up a new journal to promote it in the mid-nineties, people did not pay much attention. Popular interest arose mainly in the past five years or so.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps not far-fetched to imagine a connection between this wave and China's rise as an economic superpower. With an average of 40% export rate to annual GDP over three decades, and with WTO membership in 2001, there was a sharp rise in foreign trade, as well as in foreign exchanges in every possible area. The success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, held one month before the financial crisis exploded in the US, saw the surging of a collective anxiety over national identity. This anxiety proved different from classic nationalism. Instead of raising questions about ruling legitimacy in domestic political front, it longs for cultural identity vis-à-vis foreign nationals in the age of globalization. At the same time, there was growing interest, inside the PRC and abroad, to narrate and explain China's success story. As in the case of the four East Asian "little tigers", Confucianism once again became a popular choice in the many explanations.

However, as our brief historical survey has shown, religious features in Confucianism were quite dubious by the Qing time. No matter how many similarities can be detected between Confucianism and other major creeds, Confucianism was primarily concerned with governing the world and rectifying disorders within it, rather than aiming to be a religious tradition. Modern bids to make Confucianism a substitute for religion have thus always been based on nationalist, or supposedly civilizational grounds, such as in Kang Youwei's case. To this, we can look at some of the fundamental propositions in one of the Four Books, *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*). In the following passage, an order of action is laid out to all under the Heaven (*tianxia*). It starts from individual human beings, who are

57 Chen Ming "Approaching a Civil Confucianism: Interview with Mr. Chen Ming," *Reflexion*20, pp. 236-8.

enjoined to acquire knowledge to become cultivated persons. It then goes on:

“Once their persons being cultivated, their families will be regulated. Once their families are properly regulated, their states will be rightly governed. Once their states are rightly governed, all that is under Heaven will be tranquil and happy.”<sup>58</sup>

This formulation of the ideal human condition, ascending from the individual to the family to the state and then to the whole known world, became the short-hand popular understanding of Confucianism for centuries. Yet, China’s social life today would make all the four steps either unrealistic or undesirable. Let us consider the four one by one.

At the level of the individual, the emphasis falls on moral cultivation of the self. This starts with the acquisition of “complete” knowledge, so that the heart (*yi*) is sincere and the mind (*xin*) rectified. But the ultimate end of study is pacification of “all that is under Heaven,” which advances criteria in assessing successful self-cultivation. In comparative sense, rather than being called to submit unconditionally to the absolute authority of an Almighty, the imagined convert of a Confucian religion must be ready to accept practical tests and prepared to serve in the real world at large. In the old days, this would be measured, in theory and in practice, by the civil service examination system. Passing the examinations was a certification that the candidate had acquired the proper knowledge, proper heart, proper mind, and proper personal cultivation; as a result, he could be granted the right to step into a Confucian temple and participate in official sacrificial rituals.

What is behind this procedure is the fact that Confucianism does not open itself to the multitudes. According to this doctrine, the virtue of a gentleman is like the wind; whereas the virtue of the commoners is like the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends. The focus on self-cultivation through learning on one hand and on self-cultivation to assure virtuous rule on the other split Confucianism into two directions in modern times, one tending to moral education of the self, and the other to political definition of good government. Thus, for all the efforts of its advocates, in its relation to the common people, Confucianism has never shaken off its image as essentially a preceptor. Anxious or weary individuals, suffering from insecurity, fear, or anguish under the mounting pressures of the modern world, can hardly find in Confucianism the kind of existential solace offered by major world religions. Nor are they readily admitted into the ranks of Confucian followers.

In fact, if there was any religious connection between officially sanctioned Confucianism and commoners’ life in pre-twentieth century China, it was

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58 James Legge, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*, New York: Dover Publications, 1971, pp. 358-59, with modifications.

not in the rituals performed by the educated few in honor of Confucius, but in the ancestor worship shared by neo-Confucianism and society at large. The Confucian emphasis on the family is more explicitly linked in the *Analects* to a patriarchal order, in which mourning rituals to honor forebears are focused above all on the male ancestral line. In late imperial times, this aspect of Confucianism as a system of faith was not only inscribed in legal codes but also kept up by local Han communities, where the law was not always vigilantly enforced by the State. Ancestral worshipping as part of religious life in ethnic Han communities is a fact that can be seen in the family-clan clustered bury ground, in contrast to, say, Muslim customs. However, as our historical review shows, in a secularizing process that went over many centuries, ancestral worship and filial piety had ambiguous relationships, splitting and reemerging over time, resulting in a generally observed custom that had great internal flexibility to accommodate people of different social standings.

In the PRC after 1949, ancestral worship was officially regarded as superstition, to be eliminated by spreading scientific knowledge. That the official position did not encounter lasting resistance or challenge is a testimony to the weak religious intensity in the popular belief. Social life in China was already transformed by war and revolution before 1949. Further changes under political pressure, such as the Cultural Revolution, or sweeping marketization in the past three decades have made it utterly impossible to re-create the patriarchal order of imperial China. Yan Yunxiang's anthropological study on individualization in Chinese society shows this clearly. According to Yan, social practice in both urban and rural areas, and more strikingly in the countryside than in big cities, has transformed the social role of a multi-generational family. Previously, it was a pivotal unit in the organization of social life, shouldering duties encompassing economic, cultural and political activities. Now it has changed into a residual cushion for members of satellite nuclear families to fall back on, who tend to be struggling as lonely individuals, often far away from home, in an alienating modern world.<sup>59</sup>

Still, if we remember the four domains of the dictum in the passage from the *Great Learning*, what follows the individual and the family are the administration of the state and pacification of all under the Heaven - a passage from personal life leading directly to political rule, lending the doctrine readily to adaptations into modern nationalism. The Song-Ming Confucianism maintained a religious dimension in its reverence to a mystic past and its deference to imperial rule as the representative of the Heaven. The Manchu Qing further strengthened the emperor's claim to be the sole mediator between Heaven and human realm. In the post-imperial era, this religious dimension has been stripped from political settings. What remains in today's political Confucianism is a residue imagination

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59 Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, Oxford: Berg Publisher, 2009.



that connects the State with some religious attributes without substantiating the contents. Its lack of modern religious significance is combined with a positivist approach towards its assumed political task, purportedly offering a definitive answer to how the whole realm under Heaven may be effectively pacified. These features have all contributed to making the revival of Confucianism today part of nationalistic fever.

In recent years, the PRC has seen many huge and lavish ceremonies performed at Confucian temples around the country. Yet there has been no steady supply of master of ceremonies. Officials from central or local government have attended the occasions, and so have scholars or intellectuals promoting the revival. But these people do not always take up the duty to actually monitor the ceremonies. More often than not, the commanding roles in these rituals are taken by professional performers, often in costumes of mandarin officials from dynastic times, making them into spectacles closer to tourist attraction than religious devotion.

### Essentializing Confucian China

In recent years, many Chinese intellectuals have turned to Confucianism without seeking to make it an official religion. Yet, by jumping onto the bandwagon they lend intellectual credentials to the new revival. We have mentioned that the earlier New-Confucians struggled in relative isolation but still managed to pass on the cultural prestige of Confucianism through the twentieth century. In the new round, intellectual and scholarly works have been much more ambitious than their New-Confucian predecessors. Confucianism has become the shorthand for Chinese culture or Chinese civilization when arguing for various positions, often without critical comments to balance the view. Promoters of a Confucian religion are taking advantage of the situation. Obviously, it is also behind the justification to name the State-sponsored cultural campaign "Confucius Institute" around the world.

A leading example of intellectual-scholarly work in this regard is the massive four-volume work of Wang Hui, entitled *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi). The book traces the origins of modern Chinese thought to the Tang-Song dynastic transition of the tenth-eleventh centuries, but its main goal is to explain why China - and China alone in the whole world--has managed to keep its political continuity in territorial setting throughout wars and revolutions over more than a century. China did not split along ethnic lines after the 1911 Republic Revolution; nor did it fall apart by the end of the Cold War. In a lengthy introduction, the author criticizes strongly some Western constructions, such as "empire", "nation-state", teleological history, and origins of modern nationalism, believing that these have been blocking a proper under-

standing of China's history. These are all very reasonable and interesting points. The problematic part is his main argument that Confucianism (*ru xue*), especially its emphases on an overarching, centralized unity (*da yitong*), is key to understand the political continuity in China's modern history. Wang Hui also argues that, in the last thousand years of China's imperial period, Confucianism had been able to regenerate itself once and again, responding to changing historical conditions energetically and capably, including, or in particular, the creative constructions of a multi-ethnic empire in a flexible conceptualization of "China" (Zhongguo) under the Qing, and a universally harmonious order between all various nations around the globe for the future.<sup>60</sup>

By the end, Wang Hui answers his own research question from a Han-centered viewpoint of Confucianism only. There is no examination from perspectives of the non-Han peoples. In this book and many other writings, Wang Hui has argued to view Chinese tradition as an overlooked rich resource for alternative imaginations. The most visible contrast in his work often turns into a geographic division between "West" and "China." Although he has not argued forthrightly for a Confucian revival, Confucianism occupies a dominating position in his narrative about "China's" past and receives little negative critique.

Another example would be the philosopher Zhao Tingyang who strives to construct a "world system" of all-under-Heaven for our own age. In Zhao's understanding, our world is still a "non-world" in conceptual terms. What we have in the institution of the United Nations, or in the idea of international relations, are not visions about a desirable and feasible world, but rather, an over-stretched application of ideas based on the nation-state. A conceptualized world must be a political entity; with internal consistency; be "transference between different political systems;" and corresponding to ethical legitimacy. Quoting the same passage from *The Great Learning*, he claims that the Confucian political construction from family to state and to all-under-Heaven provides a best ethical model for a political world today, disregarding completely the patriarchal principle in Confucianism and its oppressive nature towards women.<sup>61</sup>

In today's China, Confucianism is claiming an essentialized Chineseness openly and forcefully. It is against this situation that some advocates, such as Chen Ming, the editor of a Confucian journal we mentioned earlier, are promoting a "civil religion" of Confucianism (*gongmin rujiao*). He claims that to promote Confucianism as a civil religion is simply to say that Confucianism takes up a relatively greater role in our civil religion. It covers Confucian concepts of values that can also be accepted by followers of Buddhism, Muslim, or Christianity. In fact, Chen Ming freely admits that his own theory of Confucian civil religion is constructed with hope that Confucian tradition could gain greater influence in his

60 Wang Hui, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (in Chinese), vol. 1, pp. 1-102.

61 Zhao Tingyang, "All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace," *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, pp. 46-66.

country of multi-cultural unity (*duoyuan yiti de guojia*). His hope is in turn built on the belief that has essentialized Confucianism in contemporary China.<sup>62</sup>

### Conclusion

The Confucian revival has not produced numbers of converts comparable as yet to either Buddhist or Christian churches. But it is more audible than these, and is buttressed by governmental appropriations, scholarly endeavors, public ceremonies and private customs. Of all major faiths in the PRC, it is the most politically charged, laying nationalist claims to Chineseness, to represent China in a globalizing world, and to offer peculiarly Chinese contributions to a better future for the world. In such projections, Confucianism becomes *the* symbol for Chinese culture, Chinese tradition, or simply China itself. The danger is to non-Confucian traditions and ethnic groups living within the national boundary of the PRC, as well as to women's rights and rights of other disadvantaged social groups. If a civil religion is to be desired, and if we recognize that Confucianism was not the "core" of Chinese civilization for more than two thousands years, then why do we have to promote a "civil religion" in the name of Confucianism? Thus if we return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, whether any of China's religious communities would be capable of putting forth their own candidates in a democratic election, it seems clear that it is the least religious of these, Confucian position, that would have most chance of giving rise to a political party in the 21st century China. This is a role that historical Confucianism never played before. It is a prospect worthy of our attention, and maybe of our worries as well.

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62 Chen Ming, "Approaching a Civil Confucianism: Interview with Mr. Chen Ming," *Reflexion*20, pp. 258-9.

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## Шаохуа Ванг

### СТАРЕ МУДРОСТИ ЗА НОВО ДОБА? ОЖИВЉАВАЊЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНОГ КОНФУЦИЈАНИЗМА У КИНИ

#### Резиме

У последње време, конфуцијанизам се поново одређује као суштина кинеске цивилизације и као религија која је најбитнија кинеском народу у дугој историји. Научници апелују на Комунистичку партију Кине да учини конфуцијанизам државном религијом (guojiao). Које су политичке последице овог феномена? Могу ли ове тврдње издржати интелектуалне изазове? Изводећи кратко историјско истраживање религиозног конфуцијанизма у кинеској политици, заједно са анализом заједничких суштинских принципа који одликују различите позиције конфуцијанизма данас, овај рад тврди да је религиозни конфуцијанизам који данас презентују његови заговарачи уствари конструисан мит који датира још из времена Quing (1644-1911). Ово учење не садржи религиозни садржај везан за индивидуално постојање нити за друштвени живот у савременој Кини. Али његова снага првенствено долази из везе са државом, или колетивној нацији (Zhonghua), и то преко света изван етничке Хан заједнице. Упркос овоме – или тачније због овог – ревитализован религиозни конфуцијанизам може имати највећи потенцијал да постане политичка сила у доби глобализације у Кини, већи него било која друга светска религија, чак и ако неке друге религије имају више следбеника у Кини од конфуцијанизма.

**Кључне речи:** религиозни конфуцијанизам, Даоизам, Све-испод-раја, дечја побожност, савремена Кина, национализам

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