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The Neo-Confucian Renovation

The emergence in the Song epoch of a grand cultural phenomenon, known in the West as "neo-Confucianism", has become one of the cardinal events in the history of Chinese civilization. It was neo-Confucianism that finally formed what is commonly called the spiritual culture of traditional China. Before acquaintance with the West and gaining its present state, China was a country dominated by neo-Confucian ideology. Therefore, most researchers, both in the West and in the East (primarily in Japan and Taiwan), seeking to understand the present fate of the Middle State, turn their attention to neo-Confucianism as the source of spiritual traditions, socio-political attitudes, psychological stereotypes that still have significant influence on the minds of the Chinese people.

Before analyzing the concept of neo-Confucianism, it is worth discussing, in brief, the history and critical features of Confucianism that, eventually, led to the emergence of neo-Confucianism. Confucianism arose in one of the most turbulent periods of Chinese history. The reign of the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC) was marked by a whirlwind of events with China breaking up into feudal principalities leading bloody wars (Yao 17). Therefore, it should not be surprising that harmony has turned into a longed-for goal. Various Chinese schools adhered to each their strategy of restoring order from chaos. Realists sought to achieve balance through the power of law, punishments, and weapons. Others believed that

harmony would be ensured by universal love without distinction. Taoists justified the departure to nature spontaneously. But the Confucians outlined a different path. To the realists, they said that power would only breed dissatisfaction. Besides, love will put an end to the war except in utopia. While addressing the concept of Taoists, they claimed that the departure from society in itself looks selfish and irresponsible. The Confucian strategy has been to involve, drive into the noise and turmoil of politics and society, especially in the ethical and ritual aspects. Unlike religious traditions that focus on the relationship between man and the deity, Confucianism focused on the relationship between people, as well as on etiquette, rites, and decencies. People are not born and do not grow in isolation, noted the Confucians, and only through interaction with other human beings, they become fully human. One of the Confucian revelations says that there is no contradiction between work on oneself and harmony in society. Like modern evangelical Christians, the Confucians suppose if one wants to change the culture, he or she first has to improve themselves. Confucianism has always been characterized by a state of bordering on fanaticism in a person's ability to cultivate up to the approach to the ideal. Confucians always stress the importance of working on themselves through education. Confucian education is not the study of any craft, but the mastery of the art of being human. Despite the strong commonality, Confucianism does not preclude personal improvement. In essence, self-improvement is an integral part of Confucianism. But the Confucians argue that people become themselves, as well as transform society, only with the help of other people. The path to social harmony lies through the success of the individual, and the prosperity of such an individual is possible with the proper construction of relationships with the people around him.

After the death of Confucius, the voices of two great thinkers and rivals, Mencius and Xunzi, prevailed. All Confucianism was built on the assumption that a person can improve; harmony in society and political order proved to be unattainable if it turned out that people are not able to change for the better. Mencius (372 year - 289 BC) is known as a supporter of views about the original human goodness (De Bary 112). People create good because they are created by such, and when they create evil, the reason is education and upbringing, which prevented them from striving for good. Everyone has compassion, which generates kindness; a sense of shame, from which loyalty to duty grows; the idea of courtesy, which creates decency, as well as an understanding of what is right and what is not, giving birth to wisdom. To become a human, one does not need to strive for anything external, outside oneself. After Confucius, the influence of Mencius and Xunzi, other two of the big three of the first wave of Confucianism, was unstable. Confucius during his lifetime never succeeded in acquiring prominent political friends and influencing people in power, and Mencius and Xunzi were persona non grata with the short-lived Qin dynast (De Bary 113). The first emperor of China, a ruthless Machiavellian, possessed by the rule of law, or more precisely by punishments and power, did not want to hear about the principle of Confucius, according to which rulers treat subjects as loving fathers. Therefore, he ordered the burning of Confucian books and the execution of Confucian scholars. But under the Han dynasty, Confucianism received the same support as Christianity under Constantine, and in 136 BC it turned from the pursued movement into an officially accepted state, became the dominant intellectual impulse in China (De Bary 315). Confucianism in part gave up the position of Taoism and Buddhism under the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) but was revived under the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), when neo-Confucianism again became the dominant intellectual impulse in China (De Bary 517, 518). The addition of "neo-Confucianism" was due to two main circumstances. The

first was the readiness of neo-Confucians to borrow ideas from Buddhists and Taoists without a twinge of conscience. Just as Muslims rejected the asceticism of Christian monks, neo-Confucians opposed the ascetic motives of Buddhist and Taoist monasticism. At the same time, neo-Confucians borrowed from the "three teachings" various spiritual practices, including a meditative "silent sitting." In the understanding of neo-Confucianism, the cultivation of deference was inextricably linked with the desire for wisdom in obtaining a Confucian education, which at that time included a vast set of mental, physical and spiritual practices (reading books, silent sitting, rites, exercise, calligraphy, arithmetic, empirical observation, etc.). The second key factor was the transformation of the Confucian canon. Under the leadership of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the most prominent Confucian thinker of the Song dynasty, the starting point for learning was no longer the classic "Five Books," but the "Four-Books." "Analects of Confucius," the "Mencius," the "Great Learning," and the "Doctrine of the Mean" formed the basis for examinations for the title of an official in China (Yao 64). The far-reaching consequence of this reorientation has become a greater focus on the metaphysical and spiritual issues of the kind that Confucius waded. At the same time, neo-Confucians distinguished from Buddhists and Taoists an emphasis on the ethical and historical aspects of the teaching, as well as adherence to the ideas of reason and humanism. If the Taoists took spirituality away from the world, then all the leading thinkers in the period of the formation of neo-Confucianism were political figures. Some can track the prototype of the philosophy of American pragmatism in the statements of another outstanding neo-Confucian, Wang Yangming (1472-1529) (Yao 112). Previously, Confucians creatively combined the sacred and secular, heaven and humanity. Wang Yangming did the same for thought and action. According to Wang Yangming, knowledge is the beginning of the action, and action is the completion of knowledge (Yao 114).

During the twentieth century, Confucianism remained forgotten. The centuries-old tradition of Confucian examinations for the title of an official was abolished in 1905, official sacrifices in memory of Confucius ceased in 1928. In the first years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, some people talked about the integration of Communism and Confucianism (Yao 255). But in the midst of the political drama of the "cultural revolution" Confucius received the stigma of a negative character. During the anti-Confucian campaign of the 1970s, the "four survivals" - Confucian culture, ideology, customs, and habits, were attacked, they were replaced by "four innovations" (proletarian culture, ideology, customs, and habits). The leaders of the Communist Party condemned Confucius as "number one enemy" and accused Confucianism of all sorts of grave crimes against Chairman Mao's new Marxist-Leninist ideology. Following in the footsteps of the anti-Confucian Qin dynasty two thousand years ago, Red Guards collected and burned Confucian books, smashed the statue of Confucius in the temple of his hometown of Qufu. The ideology that was once the heart and soul of Chinese civilization, communists branded as a feudal challenge thrown to progress, alien to modern superstition, an instrument of reactionary forces, sexism, and class oppression. Today, Confucianism has once again risen above China. The modern importance and essentialness of Confucianism lie in no other place than in its capacity to enable individuals to comprehend and tackle their problems, and current Confucian researchers need to adapt to present circumstances to answer all the questions that have been raised, and how to renew Confucian esteems with regards to present day life (Yao 246). As a variety of social and cultural traditions, Confucianism had been experiencing steady changes, which were both the wellspring of its vitality and the premise of its imperativeness (Yao 246). The entry of western culture in the nineteenth century basically dismissed the self-change or self-modification favored by Confucians (Yao 246). The crumple of Confucian states implied that

old Confucianism was at that point “out dated”, and to survive, Confucianism needed to change itself all the more quickly and in a general sense (Yao 247). To date, new Confucians endeavor to modernize Confucianism in another setting by making a social space and a real plausibility for the innovative change of Confucian humanism as a living custom in the present day East Asia (Yao 247). Among the greatest representatives of neo-Confucianism, one can mention Xiong Shili (1885-1968), Fung Yuolan (1895-1990), Qian Mu (1895- 1990), Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), and Liang Suming (1893-1988) (Yao 9). There also were many other philosophers that significantly contributed to the development and revival of neo-Confucianism. Educational Confucian courses appeared in universities throughout the country. Confucius is quoted by the leaders of the Communist Party, not least President Hu Jintao, whose slogan is "to build a harmonious society" is the expression of Confucius. The pro-Confucian impulse in modern China is so strong that it is even suggested that Confucianism will soon replace Marxism-Leninism from the pedestal of official state ideology. Certainly, before the transformation of the Chinese Communist Party into Chinese Confucian is still far away, but millions of students in all of China today study the classical works of Confucius and Mencius along with the works of Marx and Mao, and sometimes instead of the last. This popular revival was accompanied by another, more philosophical, called the new Confucianism. Some observers argue that this new phenomenon is the third wave of Confucianism, unlike the first wave of the first millennium and the second wave of the second millennium, reaching a peak not only in China but throughout the world. Neo-Confucianism has several primary features. First, fundamentalism is inherent in neo-Confucianism; the assertion of the fundamental postulates of Confucius in their original form and as truths self-evident and not needing to be justified or reinterpreted in the light of subsequent intellectual development (such an approach has already clearly manifested itself in

the work of Han Yu). Secondly, neo-Confucianism is characterized by revivalism; the recognition that for the assertion of Confucian ideals, the existing socio-political conditions are an obstacle, so the latter must be changed, bringing them closer to the ancient order. To a greater extent than to all Confucianism, neo-Confucianism is inherent to humanism, rationalism, and historicism. As for humanism, already the teaching of Confucius himself was focused on the person and his place in society, and not on a supernatural order or divine law. In neo-Confucianism, this emphasis on personality and society is contrasted with the Buddhist and Taoist view of the world, which considers it indifferent to the human values and destinies of society. More specifically, this manifested itself in the fact that all neo-Confucian schools somehow recognized human nature as being essentially good and thereby resolutely different from Buddhists. Rationalism, in this case, does not imply a conscious opposition to faith or intuition, but involves three points: 1) the world is considered orderly, consisting of harmonized parts; 2) the person can comprehend this order, lying behind the chaos of things and events; 3) it is necessary to systematically study "things " (people, their institutions, and history, as well as classical works) and accumulate knowledge. Here neo-Confucianism again opposed Buddhism, which affirmed the absence of any substance behind the things, their ephemeral nature of the moral law. On the contrary, interest in things means that the seeds of a certain kind of empiricism were hidden in Confucian rationalism. Historicism is closely connected with the general ethical orientation of Confucianism. The order that neo-Confucians found in the world was ultimately more moral than rational, and also overcoming Buddhist asceticism and nihilism. Such a small set of signs of the neo-Confucian spiritual model is logically connected with the notion of intellectual breadth and the lack of coercive character in neo-Confucianism, which was expressed in particular in the assimilation of Buddhist and Taoist ideas and tolerance for dissent. Taking on the stereotypical notions of

Confucianism as something fossilized, the new Confucians stated that if Confucius transformed the traditions inherited from him, then their right and duty is to change the very Confucianism. New Confucians try to apply the ancient wisdom of their traditions to such problems of our time as science, liberalism, democracy and human rights, and along the way, rid these traditions of sexism and patriarchy. New Confucianism is popular in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the US. In an unceasing dialogue with Western philosophers and theologians, the new Confucians willingly worship the ideals of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, but insist that they should be supplemented by the ideals of community.

All in all, neo-Confucianism has a long and diverse history. In the beginning of XX century, in China there was such a powerful spiritual shift caused by a cultural shock from the closest contact in the history of the country with a foreign and fundamentally alien civilization that the intellectual mutation it produces allows talking about modern forms of a philosophical orientation that goes beyond the borders of Confucianism. Thus, in the broadest sense, the history of neo-Confucianism encompasses more than 1,300-year period - from the Tang dynasty to the present day.

Works Cited

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