

Confucian Traditions in Modern East Asia: Their Destinies and Prospects

Ming-huei Lee (Taipei)*

Introduction

In the past, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam together formed a “Confucian Cultural Sphere.” In addition, because of the immigration of the Chinese, Confucian culture constitutes an essential part of the cultures of Singapore and Malaysia. Although the modern fate of Confucian traditions in these countries has been somewhat different, they were faced with common problems, such as the challenge from the West, the pursuit of modernization, and the collapse of traditional systems, among others. The most significant commonality was, perhaps, the eclipse of Confucianism as a national ideology. This paper will argue that after East Asia’s entry into the modern world, the restoration of Confucian traditions to the status of national ideology, as Jiang Qing 蔣慶 wishes, is impossible. Nevertheless, Confucian traditions can still function as one of the main resources for cultural “*Bildung*.” Moreover, Confucianism should not retreat into the realm of “inner sagehood (*nei sheng* 內聖),” as Yu Ying-shih (Yu Yingshi 余英時) suggests, since Confucianism is characterized by the connectedness of “inner sagehood” and “outer kingliness (*wai wang* 外王).” In the 21st century, Confucianism should develop a modern system of ethics as well as theories of cultural, political, and social criticism.

I Modern Confucianism: A Wandering Soul?

In a 1988 paper entitled “The Predicament of Modern Confucianism”¹ renowned Yu Ying-shih used the metaphor of a “wandering soul” to describe modern Confucianism. Yu, who approves of Confucian tradition, did not mean

* The author is Research Fellow of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Professor of the Graduate Institute of National Development, National Taiwan University, Taipei as well as Professor of the Graduate Institute of Philosophy, National Central University, Chungli, Taiwan. He is now also Lecture Professor of Philosophy as Changjiang Scholar at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China.

1 Yu 1988. This paper was presented by Yu at the conference “Ruxue fazhan de wenti ji qianjing” 儒學發展的問題及前景 [Problems of the Development of Confucianism and Its Prospects] held by Singapore’s East Asia Institute in August 1988.

to mock Confucianism but rather intended to clearly describe the predicament of modern Confucianism. Yu also noted that in the past the institutionalization of Confucianism allowed it to dominate China's traditional culture to a great degree, but when the modern era began, in the process of the total collapse of Chinese society, China's traditional political and social systems were rocked in succession, and "the connection between Confucianism and the political and social systems was broken, and institutionalized Confucianism died."² Confucianism no longer had a system to depend on and became like a wandering soul, hence Yu's use of the metaphor.

Yu also pointed out that there was one important reason why modern Confucianism fell into this predicament: traditional Confucianism lacks its own system or organization and has to depend on existing political and social systems, a situation different to that of Western religions (such as Christianity). After entering modern society, Christianity was able to base itself on its own churches and so avoided becoming a wandering soul. In contrast, in modern society Confucianism has no churches to base itself on. It could perhaps be said that modern Confucianism is able to attach itself to universities and scattered Confucian communities, however, modern universities emphasize specialization and would inevitably lead to some conflict with the traditional Confucianism's emphasis on liberal arts and general education.

This being the case, in which direction should Confucianism move in the future? How should it position itself in modern society? Yu does not offer a clear solution in this paper, however, in another paper entitled "Confucianism and Modern Life", he provides an initial answer:

A modern way forward for Confucianism is to become part of daily life, and it seems that only by doing this can it free itself from the system and regain its influence on spiritual values.³

He goes on to state that Confucianism of the Ming and Qing dynasties after Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 already had this orientation. In fact, this broke the traditional Confucian "inner sagehood, outer kingliness" (*nei sheng wai wang* 內聖外王) ideal and the "sage ruler, worthy chancellor" (*sheng jun xian Xiang* 聖君賢相) arrangement.⁴ He concludes:

Modern, daily-life oriented Confucianism can realize itself only in the private domain, separating it from the public domain, a situation that is roughly similar to the modern Western separation of church and state. In other words, Confu-

2 Yu 1992, 99; Yu 1996a, 162.

3 Yu 1998, 173.

4 Yu 2003 mainly focuses on using historical materials to prove this viewpoint.

cianism can still play an important role on the level of self-cultivation and maintaining order in the family; however, in terms of governing the country and pacifying the world, Confucianism can only project indirect influence as a “cultural backdrop.”⁵

I do not disagree with Yu on a fundamental level, but has reservations, primarily because Yu overlooks the possibility of a modern transformation of traditional “inner sagehood, outer kingliness” thought. However, before discussing this question further, I will follow Yu’s “wandering soul” idea and review the modern fate of Confucian traditions in East Asia.

II Modern Fate of Confucian Traditions

During the pre-Qin era, before Confucianism became China’s national ideology, it was also in a “wandering soul” state. Although Confucius spent much of his life restlessly traveling to various surrounding states, he had little influence and was forced to give up his efforts to find a ruler whom he could serve and instead decided to promote his ideas and accept disciples. Mencius, the so-called “Second Sage,” had much the same experience. Only after the establishment of the Han Empire was Confucianism combined with the system of autocratic monarchy, attaining the status of national ideology. This amalgamation lasted until the Manchu Qing Dynasty ended in 1911. In addition to the autocratic monarchy system, Confucianism was also dependent upon the examination, education, and family clan systems. The examination system included the Han era recommendation (*chaju* 察舉) and employment (*zhengpi* 徵辟) systems, the Wei and Jin dynasties’ “Nine Ranks” system (*jiu pin zhong zheng zhi* 九品中正制), and the imperial examination system (*ke ju zhi* 科舉制) after the Tang dynasty. This continued until 1905, when the Qing court abolished the imperial examination system. The education system included each dynasty’s central and local level schools, as well as the private academies that were established after the Song dynasty. This lasted until the Western educational system replaced the Chinese traditional educational system during the late Qing dynasty. The traditional Chinese family clan system was gradually replaced by the small family system with the advent of the modern age.

Among the countries of East Asia, Korea most closely mirrors the experience of China. During the period of the Three Kingdoms of Korea (from approximately the first century BCE until the seventh century) Koguryō 高句麗, Silla 新羅, and Paekche 百濟 adopted China’s systems in succession. By the

5 Yu 1996a, 178.

Koryō 高麗 era (917–1392), Confucianism spread to the Korean Peninsula, and the Koryō Dynasty actively sought to emulate China's political, educational, and examination systems. The Chosŏn 朝鮮 Dynasty (1392–1910) that followed mirrored China's various systems to an even greater extent, and Confucianism (particularly the teachings of Zhu Xi 朱熹) attained the status of a national ideology, which it retained until Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910.

After Paekche scholar Wang In 王仁 took the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) to Japan at the end of the fourth century CE, Confucianism gradually began to be valued by the Japanese nobility. The "17 Article Constitution" promulgated by Prince Shōtoku 聖德 in 604 was essentially based on Confucianist ideals. In the mid sixth century, Emperor Kōtoku 孝德 implemented the Taika 大化 period reforms, which fully copied the systems of China's Tang Dynasty. In 702, Emperor Bunbu 文武 promulgated the "Taihō code" 大寶律令, which mandated the founding of universities, the teaching of Confucian classics, and the implementation of the *koukyo* examination system, based on the Tang Dynasty's *gongju* 貢舉 system. In the early Nara 奈良 (710–794) and Heian 平安 (794–1185) periods, the study of Chinese culture, which included Confucianism, developed rapidly. During the subsequent Kamakura 鎌倉 (1185–1333) and Muromachi 室町 (1338–1573) periods, the military dominated, and the literati lost influence. During the Tokugawa 德川 period (1603–1867), there was a revival of Confucianism and the Shōgun's administration (*bakufu* 幕府) took the teachings of Zhu Xi as the basis for official education. This situation persisted for over 200 years, until 1867 when the Tokugawa *bakufu* restored imperial rule and Emperor Meiji 明治 came to power. The most significant difference between Japan and China is that the Japanese examination system existed in name only after the 11th century.

China's Han Dynasty government established the three prefectures of Jiaozhi 交趾, Jiuzhen 九真, and Rinan 日南 within the borders of Vietnam. During the Tang Dynasty, the area that is now central and northern Vietnam was a Chinese prefecture, historically called Annam 安南. Prior to Vietnam's independence in the 10th century, Vietnam's various systems were identical to China's. After Vietnam's independence, a succession of dynasties continued to use China's systems, establishing schools and an examination system covering the Confucianist "Four Books" and "Five Classics." Vietnam's examination system was established by the Ly 李 Dynasty (1010–1225), continued during the Tran 陳 dynasty (1225–1400), and reached its zenith during the Le 黎 dynasty (1428–1789) before it was abolished in 1919. Therefore, until Vietnam became a French colony in 1883, it could be said to be a Confucian state, at least in terms of its system.

III Restoration of Confucianism in a Form of State Religion?

These brief historical overviews of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam can give us some understanding of the meaning of Yu Ying-shih's "wandering soul" metaphor. This has also been the fate of Confucian traditions in modern times. In the face of such difficulties, during the late Qing dynasty Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) advocated establishing Confucianism as the state religion, with Confucius venerated as its founder and copying Western Christianity by establishing a "Confucian church" (Kongjiaohui 孔教會). After the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, he and Chen Huanzhang 陳煥章 (1880–1933), Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) and other well-known scholars further promoted the "Confucian religion movement" and gained the support of Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) and his Republican government. But following the dissolution of Yuan's "Hongxian Empire" 洪憲帝制, Kang Youwei's "Confucian religion movement" failed.⁶ The primary cause of its failure was that it went against contemporary trends, attempting to restore Confucianism's sacred traditions in a modern society that was already "disenchanted." It is little wonder that Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), Kang Youwei's closest student, published an article entitled "Defending the Religion Is Not the Way to Venerate Confucius",⁷ openly opposing the "Confucian religion movement."

Kang Youwei's "Confucian religion movement" represented an effort to institutionalize Confucianism. This effort was not the only one of its kind; a similar movement exists in present-day Mainland China, namely the "political Confucianism" (*zhengzhi ruxue* 政治儒學) and "kingly way of governance" (*wangdao zhengzhi* 王道政治) promoted by Jiang Qing 蔣慶. In 1989, he published an article in Taiwan's *Ehu Monthly* entitled "The Practical Significance of and Problems Facing the Revival of Confucianism in Mainland China". In this article Jiang boldly stated that

[...] the greatest problem in Mainland China at present is the problem of reviving Confucianism,

and, furthermore, that

[...] Confucianism should replace Marxism, be restored to its lofty historical status and become the orthodox thought representing the life and spirit of the Chinese nation in Mainland China today.⁸

6 For more on Kang Youwei's "Confucian Religion movement," cf. Gan 2006a.

7 Liang's article "Baojiao fei suoyi zun Kong lun" 保教非所以尊孔論 was published at 22.02.1902.

8 Jiang 1989, 170: 31, 35.

He has also written a book entitled “Political Confucianism. The Re-orientation, Characteristics, and Development of Modern Confucianism” to further elucidate his concepts.⁹ In Jiang Qing’s view, the thoughts of Confucius covered two different dimensions, which developed into two different traditions, “mind-and-nature Confucianism” (*xinxing ruxue* 心性儒學) or “life Confucianism” (*shengming ruxue* 生命儒學), as well as “political Confucianism” or “institutional Confucianism” (*zhidu ruxue* 制度儒學). The former tradition was carried on by Zisi 子思, Mengzi 孟子, and the Song-Ming Confucianists; the latter, originating from Confucius’ *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), was carried on by Xunzi 荀子, the Han dynasty’s Gongyang 公羊 and New Text (*jinwen* 今文) Schools, the Sui dynasty’s Wang Tong 王通, and the Qing dynasty’s New Text School.¹⁰ He criticizes Hong Kong and Taiwanese New Confucianists for only being familiar with the traditions of “mind-and-nature Confucianism” and not with those of “political Confucianism.” He further charges them that their wish to develop democratic systems from Confucianism is equivalent to doing away with Confucianism’s particular characteristics and positions and drawing closer to Western culture, and is in fact “Westernization” in another guise.¹¹ He, on the other hand, advocates making full use of the traditional resources of political Confucianism and

[...] establishing a political system with Chinese characteristics, [...] in concrete terms, a political system that realizes aspects of Confucian thought such as the spirit of “rites and music” (*li yue* 禮樂), the ideal of “the kingly way”, the wisdom of “the great unity” (*da yi tong* 大一統), the “three eras” (*san shi* 三世) doctrine and the doctrine of “emperor as the highest rank” (*tian zi yi jue* 天子一爵).¹²

In his book “Life Beliefs and the Kingly Way of Governance: the Modern Values of Confucian Culture”¹³ Jiang proposes replacing Western democratic governance with “the kingly way of governance.” In his view, the advantage that the kingly way of governance offers over democratic governance is that democratic governance, in terms of the problem of political legitimacy, emphasizes only legitimacy based on the will of the people, while the kingly way of governance derives its legitimacy from three sources – legitimacy based on the will of the people, transcendent, divine legitimacy, and historical and cultural legitimacy – making for balanced governance.¹⁴ Working from these three sources of legitimacy, Jiang lays out a tri-cameral legislature, with the “House of Profound Confucians” (*tongru yuan* 通儒院)

9 Jiang 2003.

10 Jiang 2003, 140–143.

11 Jiang 2003, 82–83, 174–175.

12 Jiang 2003, 174.

13 Jiang 2004.

14 Jiang 2004, 299–312.

representing transcendent, divine legitimacy, the “House of Commons” (*shumin yuan* 庶民院) representing legitimacy based on the will of the people, and the “House of National Substance” (*guoti yuan* 國體院) representing historical and cultural legitimacy. The legislature would select members of the executive system, who would be responsible to the legislature. Among these three bodies, only members of the House of Commons would be elected, while members of the House of Profound Confucianists would be nominated and appointed internally and members of the “House of National Substance” would be appointed by a hereditary Duke Yan-sheng 衍聖公, Confucius’ lineal descendant.¹⁵

It is true that the modern democratic electoral system easily slides into vulgar or populist politics, but could the appointment methods of the House of Profound Confucianists and the House of National Substance really avoid the exchange of favors and arbitrary decisions by individuals? More importantly, I simply cannot see that China currently possesses the necessary historical and social conditions for the implementation of this kind of system; it is nothing but a utopian pipe dream. In my view, attempting to restore Confucianism to the status of national ideology in modern China would be like attempting to restore the ideal of Caesaropapism in the West – impractical and dislocated in time.

IV The Prospects of Confucianism in the 21st Century

Comparing Yu Ying-shih’s views with those of Jiang Qing, we may observe that while they both affirm the significance and value of the learning of the “inner sagehood” in modern society, their views on “outer kingliness” are at two different extremes: Jiang Qing overemphasizes it, while Yu Ying-shih underestimates it. In his article “Confucian Thought and Daily Life,” Yu Ying-shih quotes the view expressed by the American humanist scholar Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) in his *Democracy and Leadership*, that the teachings of Confucius can provide democratic leaders with the qualities they need. Yu takes this as support for his view that

[...] daily-life oriented Confucianism can still indirectly continue to help in governing the country and pacifying the world.¹⁶

While this is true, Confucianism can perform more functions in a modern, democratic society.

Within this framework, we may now return to the problem of “inner sagehood” and “outer kingliness”. Although the term “inner sagehood, outer kingli-

15 Jiang 2004, 313–317.

16 Yu 1996a, 179.

ness” first appeared in the “Tianxia”-Chapter of *Zhuangzi*, it is a very apt expression of Confucianism’s essence. The Confucian ideal of the “inner sagehood and outer kingliness” affirms the connection between the two, as well as the necessity of the inner sagehood leading to the outer kingliness. If modern Confucianism has indeed, as Yu states, become the study of the inner sagehood alone, and its realization can only be pursued in the private domain while only playing an indirect role in the public realm, then the essence of Confucianism has been lost. Here, we may borrow from Hegel’s terminology of legal philosophy, understanding the relationship between the inner sagehood and the outer kingliness roughly as a relationship between “*Moralität*” and “*Sittlichkeit*.” The learning of the inner sagehood in traditional Confucianism essentially belong to the realm of “*Moralität*.” As for the “*Sittlichkeit*” in Hegelian sense, it is not limited only to the realm of politics, but also covers the household, civil society, the state and even world history. I, of course, do not claim that traditional Confucianism included civil society, the state, and world history in the modern sense, but they all, without doubt, belong to the realm of politics. As for the household, it also falls within the scope of Confucianism’s “outer kingliness.” This is testified by the text of the *Analects*:

Someone addressed Confucius, saying, “Sir, why are you not engaged in politics?” The Master said, “What does *the Book of Documents* say of filial piety? – ‘You are filial, you discharge your brotherly duties. These qualities are displayed in politics.’ This then also constitutes the exercise of politics. Why must there be THAT – making one be in politics?”¹⁷

In this sense, the areas touched upon by Confucianism’s “outer kingliness” are largely the same as those of the “*Sittlichkeit*” in Hegelian sense. For Hegel, “*Moralität*” cannot stop at the self, but must necessarily extend to “*Sittlichkeit*,” just as Confucianism’s “inner sagehood” must be extended to the “outer kingliness.”

Because of this, despite East Asia’s traditional family clans having transformed into the small households of the modern day, Confucian traditions can still continue to play a role in keeping order in these small households. We may note that in the region of East Asia, places where there has been more preservation of Confucian traditions (such as South Korea and Taiwan) also place greater emphasis on making offerings to ancestors. In ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia, Confucian traditions are closely linked to making offerings to ancestors, resulting in a trend towards the “religionization” of Confucianism. In Indonesia, this process has a century of history and the “Confucian religion” (*Kongjiao* 孔教) that has been permitted to be openly active in

17 *Lunyu* 2.21.

recent years essentially takes ancestral worship and family ethics as its core. Because of the long ban on Chinese language education during the rule of Suharto, at present, nearly all Indonesian Chinese under the age of 50 are unable to speak Chinese, but “Confucian religion” has still been well preserved and passed down through the clan structure and family ethics.

In addition, Confucianism can also be a resource for *Bildung* in the realm of education. In the past, Taiwan’s Kuomintang government included the “Four Books” of Confucianism in high school “Basic Teaching Materials for Chinese Culture” course. Although this course drew criticism from academia for its political intent,¹⁸ it undeniably had certain positive uses. I developed a strong interest in Chinese culture due to this course and could be called a beneficiary of the policy. In recent years, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese social organizations’ strong promotion of children’s studying the Confucian classics outside of the school system has also had a similar effect. In university education, Confucianism can also become part of “general education” through classical readings courses.

Furthermore, Confucianism has already become the subject of specialized study in university philosophy, Chinese, and history departments. People have frequently questioned whether this trend towards the disciplinization, specialization and intellectualization of Confucianism may damage its totality and cause Confucianism to lose its vitality. In recent years, in discussions in Mainland China about “the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy,” these questions have been raised frequently. To be fair, these questions are not without reason. Those who raise such doubts mainly focus on whether or not the essence of traditional Eastern thought (including Confucian thought) can be carried on in the Western academic system. But this, in my view, misplaces the crux of the issue. The central question should be whether or not *traditional* thought, including Eastern thought, can preserve its essence in the *modern* academic system. In his famous work *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* Pierre Hadot emphasizes the meaning of “philosophy as a way of life” in ancient Western (Greek, Roman) philosophy. He further points out that in the modern western academic system, this original meaning of “philosophy” has already been replaced by “discourse about philosophy.” Clearly, both traditional Eastern and Western thought must both face the problem of specialization and intellectualization of the modern academic system.

There is no denying that while the modern academic system cannot preserve the original vitality of Confucianism, in other respects, it can actually open up another aspect of Confucianism, that is, intellectualized Confucianism. Al-

18 See Huang 2006a.

though intellectualized Confucianism is set apart from Confucianism as “wisdom of life,” it can develop a modern system of ethics and a theoretical basis for cultural, political, and social criticism, as the saying goes, this is “losing at sunrise and gaining at sunset.” I give an example below to demonstrate this kind of Confucian political criticism.

New Confucianists in Hong Kong and Taiwan – Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, and Zhang Junmai 張君勱 – have raised a theory of “developing democracy from Confucianism.” They advocated that China should employ a democratic system, based on the “intrinsic requirements” of Confucianism. Because I have already discussed the specifics of this theory elsewhere,¹⁹ they will not be unnecessarily repeated here. This theory is not, as Jiang Qing has said, drawing too close to Western culture, nor does it, as Taiwanese liberals – such as Yin Haiguang 殷海光 – have said, arise from a psychological need for self protection. In brief, this theory includes two main points: first, the combination of Confucianism with monarchy arose from particular historical circumstances, and Confucianism’s essence can be more fully realized in a modern democratic system. Second, democracy cannot be directly transplanted from the West to China and can only be absorbed through the internal development and adaptation of traditional Chinese culture. In the past, liberalism was seen as the theoretical foundation for democracy. But if the communitarian criticism of liberalism is meaningful, we have to admit that a Confucian justification for democracy is possible. This is the theoretical core of the theory of “developing democracy from Confucianism,” and can also be seen as an example of Confucian political criticism. In this sense, intellectualized “academic Confucianism” becoming another development of traditional Confucianism can also be seen as a display of Confucianism’s “outer kingliness.”

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19 Cf. Li 1991a.

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