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CONFUCIANISM AND OTHER SCHOLASTIC THOUGHTS IN THE SPRING-AUTUMN PERIOD AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND VALUES

Shichao Zhao

THE APPEARANCE OF “A HUNDRED SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT CONTENDING AND A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOSSOMING”

In Chinese history, the academic system in the Western Zhou Dynasty (1066 B.C.-770 B.C.) called “Learning under Official System” had two features. First, all classics and documents were housed in the royal residence and in the charge of official historians, divine and music officials, and few had access to the classics. Second, only noble young men had the privilege of education, learning ritual, music, marksmanship, horsemanship, classics and numbers while slaves and common folk had no right to receive education.

However, the last part of the Spring-Autumn Period saw dramatic change in social politics and economy and was followed by collapse of the social order. The court historians and music officials fled and scattered in all directions, and the classics and documents began to fall into the hands of common folk.

It was in this case that Confucius from the lower class had the chance to read the classics and to compile them. He adapted them to textbooks, enrolled students and set up his private school. He did much to propagate the culture. The principle of his schooling was “educating all regardless of their social status”. In other words, either noble or humble, could become his student if he was willing. Thus the old academic system against common folk’s right to education was virtually broken.

Soon afterwards private schools appeared like mushrooms after rain and developed successfully into various schools of thought. The schools of thought contended with one another and made progress side by side, which has been named “a hundred flowers in blossom and a hundred schools of thought in contention.” Hundred simply means a lot and there were at least more than ten important schools of thought in the period. As time is limited, I just want to present a brief discussion of the most remarkable and influential four schools of thought, namely Confucianism, the doctrine of Mo Zi, Taoism, and Legal Philosophy of Han Fei (Li, 1994; Yu, 1987; Xu, 2001; Zhao, 2003).

AN EVALUATION OF CONFUCIUS'S DOCTRINE

Confucius and Confucianism

Confucius was the founder of Confucian school. According to *The Analects of Confucius*, his doctrine covers various areas, with ritual and Ren (human-heartedness and benevolence) as its central concerns.

In the last part of the Spring-Autumn period Confucius felt bitter and distressed about the social chaos devoid of ritual and music. So he made fierce verbal attacks on the social phenomena against ritual and politically encouraged the restoration of ritual institutions. He especially paid tribute to the first king and the rituals of the Zhou Dynasty. What he wanted to restore was the strict hierarchy of Western Zhou political system based on blood connection of the Zhou tribe. Time advanced but he tried to save his society with institutions of several centuries before. So we have to concede that his political orientation was somewhat conservative.

The most important concept of Confucius's doctrine is the Good rather than the ritual. With the idea of Ren, Confucianists successfully broke the old tradition and laid a new foundation for the ancient Chinese culture to develop.

The concept of Ren is a complete framework composed of four points.

1. *Grounded on blood connection.* Confucius defined Ren as "loving people", on the principle of loving one's closer family members and then more distant relatives. He wished that the aristocrats would behave respectfully and fairly with one another, that each should do unto others as he himself was done by and that no one should impose what he did not want on another. He believed that, if they could act in this way, the society composed of harmonious and blood connected families would be stable.

2. *Psychological principle.* Confucius stated that filial piety was the first step leading to Ren. He illustrated his statement from a psychological point of view. Once when his student Zaiwo inquired the reason why he should keep three-year mourning for his late parents, Confucius replied: "Your parents passed away not yet for three years, but you have enjoyed a good life and are wearing flowery silk clothes. Is your mind in peace? At the thought of his late parents, a gentleman can not taste the flavor of delicacy, nor can he feel any pleasure in listening to beautiful music, nor can he get any comfort in living in good house. So he has to observe mourning for three years to show his filial piety." Obviously Confucius viewed "peaceful mind" as a criterion of Ren and a way to reach Ren. So he based his concept of Ren on psychology as well, trying to lead people to Ren with a peaceful mind.

3. *Human position.* Confucius defined the Good as loving people, which was not restricted to the mutual respect and love among noble men. He also suggested that rulers should cherish human resources to be employed in time of need, that moral education of the people should be prior to severe punishment, and that rulers should control exploitation to proper extent and do good to people as much as possible. His tolerant view on governing originated from primitive democracy and had a touch of humane quality, hence the subtitle of humane position.

4. *Personal ideal.* Confucius regarded Ren as his aspiring ideal of a society. He placed his ideal on gentleman personality. He requested that all gentlemen build up their noble character. So his concept of Ren included construction of an ideal personality. For an individual Ren means a perfect personality. He proposed three ways to develop a

person's ideal personality: introspection, learning and practice. He stressed repeatedly that a gentleman should take Ren as his obligation and give up his life for it when needed.

The society of the Western Zhou Dynasty governed by ritual and music was the ideal society of Confucius. During the Spring and Autumn period ritual institutions were gradually broken. To restore the ritual Confucius resorted to a new interpretation of it. He explained ritual with Ren. The ritual stemmed from time immemorial was not sufficiently justifiable but merely external and compulsory regulations. However, grounding his analysis on blood connection, psychology and so on, Confucius raised his ideas to the level of consciousness rooted in the mind of every Chinese individual and demonstrated in their daily life, which has epoch-making significance in the ideological history of China. Confucius concept of Ren, improved and developed by later generations, has become the most important, universal and far-reaching school of thought.

OTHER SCHOOLS OF THE THOUGHT AFTER CONFUCIUS

After the death of Confucius, Confucianists were divided into schools, two of which, Mencius and Xun Zi's doctrines, are worthy of introduction.

Mencius (372 B.C.—289 B.C.) assimilated Confucius's concept of Ren into his theory of "benevolent governing" which replaced the political orientation of ritual restoration. The main idea of his theory is that, economically, every peasant family should be guaranteed with fixed assets or land, and that, politically, people should be governed by moral force instead of political power. The general objective of his theory is that a wise king should keep his rule by protecting his people and that national unification could be attained through peaceful means. Interesting enough, the network of his political and economic theories was entirely grounded on the mind and emotions. He believed that everyone had a compassionate heart, and that, if a king could make his compassion felt by benevolent rule, every corner of his kingdom would enjoy peace and stability. From Confucius's peaceful mind as a criterion for Ren to Mencius's compassionate heart as the cornerstone of his benevolent governing, Mencius greatly developed the second element of Confucius's Concept of Ren—the psychological principle.

Mencius proved his idea of "compassionate heart" with four points and the concept of "man's inborn goodness". He held that everyone possesses the mind to be compassionate, ashamed of the bad, modest and righteous, which is the origin of Ren, justice, ritual and wisdom. The inborn moral quality can be named "conscience or good potential" which separated man from other animals. Mencius stressed not only the prior, universal and absolute goodness in man, but also the importance of learning. He defined learning as consciously keeping and expanding one's goodness, which he called "goodness preservation". He did not mean the improvement of one's character by learning. Simultaneously, he forwarded the idea of "spirit nurturing", namely, turning one's reason into free will so that his sensible action could be controlled by reason and then he could feel substantial. He believed that goodness preservation and spirit nurturing could enable a man to be one with Heaven. As a matter of fact, Mencius improved and elevated Confucius's concept of the personal ideal, which evolved into "inner sacredness" of Confucianism.

Xun Zi, the representative of another school of Confucianism, followed Confucius and Mencius to a degree in politics, economy, culture and ideology. He shared the idea of love based on blood connection and respect based on social hierarchy with Confucius, and shared the proposal to guarantee peasants with certain assets with Mencius. Unlike both of them, Xun Zi focused more on ritual, regarding it as an inevitable historical outcome and the means to maintain harmonious life among people who lived together. Xun Zi held that ritual came from people's products sharing and could prevent them from seizing things disorderly. In his view ritual was the governing rules to keep social order and the existence of society. Opposed to Mencius's benevolent governing based on man's inborn goodness, Xun Zi proposed "ritual governing" based on his philosophy of man's inborn evil. He suggested that a man should make use of the existing social order to check, control and change his evil nature. Clearly both Mencius and Xun Zi encouraged self-improvement but with different presumptions. Mencius focused on subjectively conscious introspection while Xun Zi urged the reform of objective reality including the nature of man and the nature of the world. He forwarded the ideas of "separate entities of man and nature" and "man's power to conquer nature". In his opinion, man should not simply complain about and rely on nature but follow its law, struggle against and make use of nature for survival.

The Doctrine of Mo Zi

Mo Zi, earlier than Mencius and Xun Zi and closer to Confucius in time, used to be a disciple of Confucianism, but eventually became its critical opponent. The doctrine of Mo Zi was based on the social function of labor. According to Mo Zi, it was labor that separated man from other animals and enabled man to exist. He proposed the view that work would make one rich and warm while idleness would make one poor and cold. He was in favor of thrift and against sumptuous funeral and extravagance of food, music and so on. Opposed to Confucius's idea of blood-connected love, Mo Zi asserted that it was not real love but differential love. As a result he established his doctrine of humanitarianism, substituting loving all for Confucius's differential love. To strengthen the spiritual prop of his doctrine, he wrote two essays entitled "Heaven's Aspiration" and "Wise Specter" which showed his worship of apparition, deities and God. His doctrine reflected the interests and demand of small producers as well as the limitation of their minds in his time.

Taoism and Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi

Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi represent Taoism. Lao Zi summed up historical experience of success and failure, blessing and disaster, existence and extinction, and adopted ancient military dialectics before he brought up a framework of government management. The key note of his political strategy was to govern by doing nothing against the law of nature. But the seeming inaction implies prevailing actions. He asserted that, if a governor was too active, he would be confined and unable to handle the whole situation. He also advanced political dialectics and the art of life characterized by modesty, gentleness and self-contentment, which exerted great impact on the social behavior of later generations of Chinese people. His political idea was oriented to the old times of "small country with small population". He boiled down his dialectical philosophy to one word, Tao, meaning the way or the law of nature. He claimed that the Tao which can be expressed is not the eternal Tao, and that the returning is Tao's

motion. He pointed out the characteristic of all things in constant change and discovered the cause of change from the transformation of opposing entities in interaction. His dialectical philosophy helped his social and political theories reach a new level.

Zhuang Zi and Lao Zi shared some similarities. Both voiced many indignant remarks to show their dissatisfaction with the social reality and suggested a return to the old time. Zhuang Zi, different from Lao Zi, advocated metaphysics to attain man's spiritual freedom. He found it terrible and against human nature that men should have been enslaved to vanity and material gain. He advanced the idea of "preserving the integrity and essence of life" so as to restore the true nature of man. Actually he perceived the conflict between man's self-existence and his social act as a means to attain some objective. For him, the restoration of man's true nature meant ways to free man from external influence, which could hardly be fulfilled in real life. He concentrated his doctrine on the pursuit of independent personality and spiritual freedom. So he offered the ways of "mind-fasting" and "sedentary mindlessness" to make one forget life and death, the right and the wrong, and to free him entirely from the concern for Ren, justice, kindness, beauty, honor and interests that chained man's nature. The personal ideal of Zhuang Zi was inevitably an unattainable illusion but it touched some aesthetic significance and played a role in exposing the dark side of society.

Legal Philosophy of Han Fei

Han Fei, a great thinker towards the end of the period, epitomized the doctrine of the legal school. He developed to the greatest extent Lao Zi's cool social observations, followed Xun Zi's idea of man's inborn evil and was opposed to Xun Zi's theory of ritual governing. Han Fei summarized and blended the merits of three groups within the early legal school before he brought up a systematic legal theory to meet the need of rising feudal monarchy. He assumed that in society there was a stake of both gains and losses in all relations. His theory focused on implementation of severe legal means to restrain and regulate people's behavior so that the policy and order of the central government could be carried out. Contrary to Confucian idea of "convincing people by virtue", Han Fei advocated rigorous penalty for minor offense to achieve deterrence, in his words, "eliminating punishment by punishing and abolishing kill by killing". Though the idea seemed to be cruel, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty found the theory most welcome as it was of great help in the unification of China and promoting social stability. Han Fei's lopsided view made evident in the short rule of the Qin Dynasty.

THE IMPACT OF THE SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT ON THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE

The contention among the schools of thought was a great movement of emancipation of the mind during this period. The great minds inherited art and knowledge from Shang and Zhou Dynasties but broke through the old tradition in various areas. Though each school of thought had its own limitation, they made ideological progress by contending with one another. No school of thought was dominant over another. Different as their doctrines were, they all led to the same road, designing the blueprint for rulers to manage states and govern people. The trend to show

public concern and active participation in social activities gradually shaped into pragmatic rationalism featuring Chinese cultural heritage. Some of the scholars became friends or teachers of kings; some acted as professors at royal academy; some traveled from state to state; and some were even unemployed. Although their fate and life experiences were quite different, they all retained their independent personality and did not turn themselves into vassals of politics or politicians. The period witnessed the first upheaval in the history of China. In the great social shock, disintegration befell the old aristocratic institutions based on ritual and patriarchic system from primitive society. As the central government of feudal monarchy had not yet been founded, the war between the states became more and more fierce. In this case, the kings of the seven states had to attract talents to strengthen themselves. In the interval of historical transition the scholars could enjoy fairly adequate academic freedom. Before long the national unification was fulfilled and the new monarch system was established. Then the intellectual prosperity called a hundred flowers in blossom and a hundred schools of thought in contention ended.

Though they were scholars themselves, Confucius used to propose a ban on heterodox doctrines, Xun Zi suggested abolition of the twelve scholars' theories and Han Fei advised his king not to follow scholars' words. Without powerful support their cultural autocracy could not be enforced. Therefore, the academic views were able to develop in a relatively free and favorable climate. After the national unification by Emperor of Chin, the intellectual atmosphere became worse abruptly. Scholars suffered bitterly from fatal attack and persecution. Lots of them were killed and books were burned. The Book Prohibition Law issued by the central government deprived individuals of their right to keep and read books and to criticize social reality with quotations from books. Political power turned cultural autocracy into reality. The government of the Chin Dynasty went to such an extreme that some intellectuals, instead of being crushed down, rose up in arms to fight against the Tyranny, which may serve as a good lesson for rulers. Wu Di, emperor of the Han Dynasty (140 B.C. — 87 B.C.), made some changes and adopted new policy of "unique adoration for Confucianism and banning other schools of thought". People were permitted to read books only from one school. The policy was a success. Since then Confucianism has become the orthodox idea and influenced China for more than 2,000 years.

The Confucianism adored by Han Wu Di deviated far from that of Confucius and was not the same as that of Mencius or Xun Zi. It was remoulded by Dong Zhongshu and other thinkers of the Han Dynasty. He synthesized four schools (Ru, Tao, Fa, Yinyang) of thought, which met the demand of the national unification after the state division and academic contention.

Later on, the Confucianism had been constantly reconstructed respectively into idealist philosophy of the Song and Ming Dynasties, the philosophy of the mind by Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, and the Han learning of the Qing Dynasty. These have exerted profound impact on the mind, value, convention and way of life of the Chinese people and developed into the unique cultural heritage of Han nationality. The heritage covers humanitarianism stemmed from tribal democracy, personal ideal, commitment to society, rationalism, optimism, self-sacrificing spirit in making contribution to just cause, and so on, which educated, encouraged and influenced lots of great men in the long history of China. We should cherish the treasure of our national culture. At the same time we have to point out that, owing to the long rule of feudal society, the traditional culture is colored with autocracy, asceticism and hierarchy. Exposed to the traditional culture generation after generation, the Chinese people shared some

psychological traits and ways of social behavior. They tend to stand in the middle of controversy, to complain but not to show fury, to protect themselves without offending anyone and to be submissive in face of adversity. Besides, the overemphasis on utilitarianism and realism resulted in the negligence and weakening of abstract speculation and scientific enquiries, which, to a degree, hindered the development of the mind and science in China.

With its merits and demerits, it is not advisable for us to spread the traditional culture blindly. We should critically inherit and assimilate its fine elements, throw away the negative and replace the old with the new. We have entered the 21st century. With the trend of economic globalization, we will usher in cross-cultural dialogue and blending of cultures. It does no good to follow the old tradition without thorough understanding. It does no good to boast about the superiority of our culture and shut foreign cultures outside China. It is only an illusion of the few who described the future world as an ideal harmony dominated by advanced science and technology of the west with Confucian culture of the east. The only realistic and wise alternative for us is to push the Chinese culture into the cultural trend of the world, to enlarge the areas of our open policy, to promote international exchange, to develop our strong points and to absorb actively the fine fruits of foreign cultures.

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