

CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUES IN MODERNIZATION THEORY: THE IMPACT OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHIES UPON MODERN CONFUCIANISM IN EAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural Dialogues in Modernization Theory: The Impact of Western Philosophies upon Modern Confucianism in East Asia

As a major source of social values, Modern Confucian theory has assumed great significance amidst the proliferation of instrumental rationalities in contemporary China. This neo-conservative current is distinguished by a multifaceted attempt to revitalize traditional thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. It is defined by a search for a synthesis between "Western" and traditional Chinese thought, aiming to elaborate a new system of ideas and values suitable for the modern, globalized society.

KEYWORDS: Modern Confucianism, intercultural syntheses, modernization theories

IZVLEČEK

Medkulturni dialogi v teoriji modernizacije: Vpliv zahodnih filozofij na moderno konfucijanstvo v Vzhodni Aziji

Teorije modernega konfucijanstva, ki predstavljajo temeljni vir družbenih vrednot, so osrednjega pomena za širitev instrumentalne racionalnosti v sodobni Kitajski. Ta neokonservativna filozofska struja je opredeljena z raznovrstnimi poskusi revitalizacije tradicionalne miselnosti s pomočjo novih vplivov, prevzetih iz zahodnih idejnih sistemov. Osrednje značilnosti te struje so iskanje sintez »zahodne« in tradicionalne kitajske miselnosti ter prizadevanja za vzpostavitev novega sistema idej in vrednot, primernih za novo, globalizirano družbo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: moderno konfucijanstvo, medkulturne sinteze, teorije modernizacije

INTRODUCTION

Modern Confucian discourses are based on the supposition that Confucian thought could be combined with capitalistic development. Its proponents also believe that a renewed form of this traditional Chinese system of social, political and moral thought could serve as a basis for endowing modern life with ethical meaning and as a "spiritual salve" for the alienation which appears as an undesirable side-effect of capitalist competition and profit-seeking.

Through the lens of intercultural philosophy, the present article examines the ways in which Mod-

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ern Confucian philosophers have changed the framework within which traditional Chinese philosophical inquiry has been carried out. The article investigates this paradigm shift, critically focusing upon the question whether it has indeed – as has been widely assumed in contemporary Sinology – become axiomatic for the further development of intercultural theoretical syntheses between Europe and China. The present investigation is based upon the hypothesis that intercultural research approaches in the field of modernization theory could augment the existing national research by comparing data, theories and methodologies and thus contributing to the mutual synthetic development of cross-cultural theory in the respective research area.

BASIC APPROACHES

The present article will focus upon specific reactions of Modern Confucian philosophies to modernization. This approach leads towards the establishing or defining of a historically consistent, specifically “Chinese” view of modernity and transformation, which manifests itself in a spiritually enriched subject, founded on the basis of a new morality of axiologically enriched reason.

Intercultural philosophy forms an important part of such approaches, as Modern Confucian philosophers have also tried to find a framework for the revitalization of traditional Chinese theories in Western methodologies and by applying Western categorical structures. Many of them have followed the approaches of German Idealism, especially those established by its pioneer, Immanuel Kant. They found his philosophy to be culturally closer to their own tradition than any other European discourse. Most of them saw Kant’s philosophy as the only Western philosophy that can engage in dialogue with Chinese philosophy. In this context, it is important to point out that Modern Confucian philosophers have changed the framework within which traditional Chinese philosophical inquiry has been carried out. This paradigm shift consists in several closely related innovations that have become axiomatic for the further development of modern Chinese philosophy.

Among other things, this means that intercultural sinological studies also have to include the analysis and evaluation of material written in Chinese and must not depend solely on the information, data and theoretical paradigms available in Western literature. This basis is already of vital importance, simply because it is the only way – at least within the specific framework of scientific methodology – to bridge the absolute dichotomy of the active subject and the passive object of cross-cultural research: the use of primary sources in the native languages allows an insight into the structure of the questions and interpretations which belong to the specific origins of the societies that form the subject of the specific research items.

Hence, besides introducing the main Modern Confucian philosophical syntheses between Chinese and Western theory, one of the central goals of the present article is the establishment of new methodological paradigms for intercultural studies. It aims to exceed conventional academic views of intercultural studies which are still (at least latently) skewed by Western frames of reference. Such views have not represented a sample of all possible conceptual positions from which the knowledge can be adequately constructed. Thus, the present investigation also represents an initial attempt to lay an assumptive foundation in search of particular sets of methods that could serve as a new theoretical framework for intercultural studies. In accordance with the assumptions delineated, it will shed light on certain core assumptions of academic inquiry which suggest future directions in the study of culture and ideology in the Asian context. In this framework, it will address possibilities and challenges of sinological scholarship in order to build and develop new models of intercultural knowledge.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE CHALLENGE OF WESTERN THOUGHT

For China, the 20th Century was a period of continuous upheaval and sweeping social change. At the end of the 19th Century, the ancient “Middle Kingdom” – despite its immense geopolitical dimensions – found itself on the margins of the modern world, as part of its semi-colonial periphery. While Western culture manifested itself at its most violent and aggressive in the form of economic and military invasions, Western philosophy, which entered China in the train of Western capital and its troops, was seen mainly as a challenge (Cheng, Chung-ying 2003: 171). This challenge was expressed in the specific language of modern formal logic and analysis and in the social function of reason as embodied in modern science and technology, as well as in the Western idea of the state, law and democracy. At a more technical level, it also appeared in forms of Cartesian Dualism and their structure of mutually contradictory polarities and in the formal framework of the traditional European dialectic, as well as in concepts and categories specific to the Western history of thought, such as the notions of substance, objectivity, truth, and so forth. Especially challenging were the elementary methodological conditions that determined this confusing set of new, mostly unknown categories and concepts, such as the demand for evidence or the formally precise establishment of essential assumptions and conclusions, explicit argumentation and accurately formulated definitions.

Despite the need to understand, explore and apply Western ideas and ideal concatenations, the acceptance of these foreign theories was essentially a superficial phenomenon and the Chinese tradition of thought proved to be much more resistant and flexible than first appeared. Although the sinicized “Marxism-Leninism” that prevailed in China during the latter half of the 20th Century as the new state ideology derived from Western theories, social functions continued to be regulated to a great extent by traditional Confucian concepts.

In traditional China, Confucianism served as a state doctrine, based upon ethical paradigms which were declared to have been derived directly from Confucius’ thought, as formulated in the 4th Century BC. In this respect, the formal critique of all other ideologies was absolutely logical, due to their incompatibility with this paradigmatic “truth”, while on a symbolic level the “genuine” teachings of Confucius represented that legal instance which ensured, in the context of traditional culture, the generally accepted “correctness” (正) of social interactions, and especially the “proper” implementation of government policies. Based on this view of society, and its ideologies and value system, it appears perfectly logical that the educated elite should, during periods of crisis, seek a solution to social chaos by exploring and correcting the “implementation” of this ideological foundation of the state.

Although dogmatism of this kind resembles the ideological functions of state religions in Western societies, the difference lies in the absolute pragmatism and utilitarianism of Confucian ethics, while the consequences of this difference are much more far-reaching than may first appear. And while it is definitely true that the Confucians did not permit any critical questioning of the prevailing doctrine in the social sphere (i.e. in the area to which it actually referred), its neglect of the metaphysical sphere and the absence of any imperative to prove the accuracy of its ethical premises with non-social arguments meant that Confucianism – as opposed to the Christian or Islamic belief systems – at least tolerated a certain subjective freedom. In any case, in China, the “proper origin” of any essential paradigm still forms the basis of the “legitimacy” of any theory. The only difference in this regard between classical and modern China is that Confucianism was replaced by Marxist dialectical materialism more than half a century ago.

THE MODERN CONFUCIAN MOVEMENT

After representing the central state doctrine and ideological foundation of traditional Chinese society for two thousand years, beginning in the 19th Century it became clear that Confucianism, at least in its orthodox traditional form, could no longer serve as a conceptual basis for the further development of modern society. In the early 20th Century, this criticism of Confucianism was best exemplified in the May 4th Movement, which had both a nationalist aspect in its opposition to Japanese and Western imperialism, and a function of internal reform in its sweeping criticism of the ossification and deleterious effects of traditional state doctrine. However, this period also planted the seeds of so-called Modern Confucianism (新儒学),¹ which arose as a critical attempt to revitalize and modernize this fundamental ancient tradition of thought. This current was distinguished by a comprehensive attempt to revitalize traditional (particularly Confucian and Neo-Confucian) thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. In this search for synthesis, the spirit of German idealism was especially important, while certain approaches of the Viennese circle also attracted a number of exponents. During the first twenty-five years of the People's Republic this current, at least officially, was reduced to silence; however, their main concerns continued to be developed by Taiwanese theorists and, to a certain extent, also by those from Hong Kong. Over the last two decades, with the explosive economic liberalization of the People's Republic of China, this current has been gradually rehabilitated and its tendency to revitalize traditional thought now forms one of the main streams of contemporary Chinese theory.

This primarily philosophical re-creation of the Confucian system of thought thus bore its first fruits in Hong Kong and Taiwan, to which the defeated Nationalist government fled after 1949. While the Chinese philosophers who lived and worked in Taiwan and Hong Kong after this date dealt much less with the sinification of Marxism and its semantic connotations, they were forced to confront the issues of modernization and capitalism much earlier than their colleagues in mainland China. We are thus dealing with a current that underwent continuous development from the early 19th Century onwards, and was interrupted only by the upheavals of WWII and, later, civil war.

Modern Confucians viewed modernization mainly as a rationalization of the world. As a discourse in which the "signposts" for a rehabilitation of traditionalism were most clearly expressed, Modern Confucianism can be considered as originating with the *Declaration for a Renewed Valuation of Chinese Culture as a World Heritage* (为中国文化敬告世界人士宣言), which was published by a group of philosophers from Taiwan and Hong Kong on January 1, 1958. The declaration included an anti-communist panegyric of Western-style democracy and affirmed the importance of patriotism and preserving traditional values. In defining the goals and contents of Modern Confucianism, it represented the basic manifesto of this current. The key under signers of the declaration were Carsun Chang (Zhang Junmai 张君勱, 1887–1969), Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) and Xu Fuguan 徐复观 (1903–1982), who are still widely regarded as the founders of Modern Confucianism, understood as a system which provided a more systematic reinterpretation of traditional Chinese philosophy based on a profounder and more integral command of the foundations of Western, especially Platonic, Kantian and Hegelian, thought (Bunnin 2002: 11).

Most theorists focused their efforts on formulating the most appropriate, philosophically rooted criticisms of the autocratic ideologies and systems that prevailed in Taiwan during the first decades of the government in exile. Thanks to the West's support of Hong Kong, due to its semi-colonial status, and Taiwan, because it was seen (especially by the Americans) as a democratic alternative to Chinese communism, both areas began to undergo an explosive process of Westernization as early as the 1950s.

1 The term *Xin ruxue* 新儒学 has sometimes been translated literally as *The New Confucianism* or as *Contemporary Confucianism* by some Western authors. To avoid confusing it with the traditional School of Principles (*li xue* 理学), generally denoted as *Neo-Confucianism* or *New Confucianism* in Western sources (including the present work), we shall omit the literal translation and apply the most frequently used term, *Modern Confucianism*.

This rapid integration into the world of Modern capitalism was (in the ideological sense) accompanied by traditional Confucian ethics based upon a hierarchical system of obedience to authority, which had already proven itself in Japan to be quite compatible with the demands and the often intolerable social conditions of early capitalism.

In contrast to the People's Republic, where until the 1980s Confucianism was regarded as the ideology of a superseded feudalism,² a number of intellectuals living in these societies (both of which were determined by post-colonial discourses) began to oppose the increasingly dominant Westernization of their countries, and started looking mainly to the framework of Confucian thought for alternatives to these developments.

THEORY OF MODERNIZATION

When dealing with the phenomenon of Chinese modernization we also have to look upon the basic questions connected to modernity, which also brings universalization, the fragmentation of cultures, or, to put it in its positive guise, so-called "multi-culturalism". Contemporary sinological research should therefore be defined by an awareness of the problematic constitution of this fashionable notion.

Modernity is a term which constitutes a sort of subtle destruction, not only of traditional cultures, which might not be an irreparable wrong, but also what Paul Ricoeur calls the creative nucleus of cultures, that nucleus on the basis of which we interpret life, and which could also be called the ethical and mythical nucleus of life. An important consequence of this trans-nationalization of capital may be that, for the first time in the history of capitalism, the capitalist mode of production appears as an authentically global abstraction, divorced from its historically specific origins in Europe. In other words, the narrative of capitalism is no longer a narrative of the history of Europe. For the first time, non-European capitalist societies are making their own claims on the history of capitalism and the history of modernization.

Marx and other classical theorists of modernity more typically assumed, rather than trying to explain, the imperviousness of traditional Chinese culture to modernization:

The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all nations, even the most barbarian, into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate (Marx, Engels 2010: 36).

While the Maoist historiography relegated Confucianism to the past, most of the Western modernization theories also implied the necessity of abandoning Confucianism if Asia were ever to develop a dynamic modern society. Here, we cannot ignore Max Weber's argument that the Protestant ethic was extremely useful in promoting the rise and the spread of modernization. According to Weber and many other classical European modernization theorists, traditional Asian ideologies were not able to fulfill such a relevant social task. Weber otherwise also wrote extensively on Asia, especially China and India, concluding that Asian cultural and philosophical or religious traditions were deeply uncongenial to modernization:

² During the last two decades in the PRC there has been an increasingly animated debate and a series of wide-ranging investigations into Modern Confucian philosophical approaches. An organisation called "Research into the Thought Currents of Contemporary Modern Confucianism" (现代新儒家思潮研究), which was founded in 1986 by two professors of philosophy, Fang Keli 方克立 and Li Jinquan 李锦全, is playing a particularly important role in this process.

Confucianism, we have seen, was (in intent) a rational ethic which reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum. Completely absent in Confucian ethic [*sic*] was any tension between nature and deity, between ethical demand and human shortcoming, consciousness of sin and need for salvation, conduct on earth and compensation in the beyond, religious duty and sociopolitical reality. Hence, there was no leverage for influencing conduct through inner forces freed of tradition and convention (Weber 1989: 227).

Modern Confucian philosophies have shown that such a Western-centered perspective on modernity is no longer valid, because these discourses reopened the question about the relation between modern capitalism and culture in a new way and on a new level of intercultural philosophical methodology.

The philosophers of the new Modern Confucianism were thus engaged in efforts to find some reconciliation between “Western” and “East Asian” values, out of which would emerge a theoretical model of modernization that cannot be equated with “Westernization”. Since Modern Confucians viewed modernization mainly as a rationalization of the world, their works reflect the special relationship that has been mainly elaborated in the specific circumstances of modern Asian societies, namely the relation between the new Confucian cultures and the rapid emergence of a super-industrial world economy. Thus, their discourses are based upon the notion that societies based upon the Confucian ethic may in many ways be superior to the West in the pursuit of industrialization, affluence and modernization.

Therefore, let us briefly examine the question about the main elements that provide the amalgamation of traditional East Asian values into the framework of capitalistic ideologies and values. These elements, which have been thoroughly pointed out by most of the Modern Confucian theoreticians, are:

- the hierarchic structure of society (五倫);
- obedience to a formal authority (孝 → 正名); and
- identification with the social group of which the individual is part, beginning with family and ending with the enterprise in which he/she works (忠).

Of course, we have to take into account that the main tasks of Modern Confucianism are not only connected to the issue of evolving new contemporary values from the Confucian tradition, but also to the fact that this tradition as such has to be adapted to fit into the axiological framework of capitalistic values. Still, the “conspiracy theory” which presupposes massive Western (especially American) support for the stream of Contemporary modern Confucianism seems to be a little exaggerated. We should not forget that one of the main stated goals of Modern Confucianism was the creation of syntheses between Western and traditional Chinese thought on the one hand, and the introduction and explanation of the specific features of traditional theoretical and methodological foundations of Chinese philosophy to the Western world on the other.

The new value-system which has been developed by the adherents of the Modern Confucian movement should ensure economic efficiency while at the same time also preserving political stability. The latter was traditionally dominated by various state doctrines which focused on hierarchic and formalistic social structures. The topical demand for the simultaneous existence of social stability, which is allegedly only realizable within a capitalist mode of production, and the “democratization” of society is inherently paradoxical. This ambivalence has to be seen in the context of questions connected to the inherent conditions of economic and cultural transition, determined by diverse social outgrowths emerging from the gap between tradition and modernity.

The typical values that determine “Modern Confucian” societies that were meticulously elaborated in the works of Modern Confucian philosophers and shall be viewed against the background of the specifically Chinese mode of modernization are summarized below:

- High valuation of education
- Priority of social over individual interests

- Emphasis on harmonious human relations (not only in the sense of a strict hierarchical structure, but also in the sense of mutual complementarity)
- Positive attitude towards worldly affairs
- Sustained lifestyle of discipline and self-cultivation
- Not only respect for authority, but also mutual respect
- Concern for stable family and community life

Proceeding from the notion of the so-called “value vacuum” that leads to the alienation which defines modern post-capitalist societies in the global world, it is also important to analyze the question whether such an East Asian model is really on its way to generating a non-individualistic version of modernity, because if so, then the previously “inevitable” or “inherent” relation between modernity and individualism would have proven itself to be nothing more than an outcome of specific (i.e. Western) historical circumstances. However, it is also worth noting that what makes something like the East Asian Confucian revival plausible is not only its offering of alternative values to those of Euro-American origin, but also its articulation of a native culture within a capitalist narrative. Therefore it is important to reiterate that the question of world culture has become much more complex than in earlier phases of capitalism.

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