Can Confucianism Modernize? An Essay on Philosophical Possibility

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On the Modernization of Confucianism

The modernization of China has motivated many contemporary thinkers, Chinese and Western alike, to look for and pursue a corresponding modernization in the mainstream tradition of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism, and this quest has naturally become a central topic in current Chinese philosophy. From its origins in ancient China, Confucianism gradually came to take its heralded place at the core of traditional Chinese thought and culture, but over the course of its more than two thousand five hundred year history, this success led Confucianism to silence most of its philosophical challenges from other traditions of thought. Beginning from the establishment of Neo-confucianism in late imperial China, the Confucian tradition demonstrated a marked tendency to insulate itself from the outside world, and it did not develop many more advanced theories that were able to fundamentally manage the challenges posed to China's engagements, both internally and externally, with the modern world. While Confucianism's long-standing mainstream status led it to regard itself as theoretically flawless already by the dawning of the twentieth century if not long before, its fundamental structures and systems of philosophical inquiry can yet be seen to contain many undeveloped and richly potential avenues of development that, if pursued, might just allow it to take a very different place as a leading voice in helping to understand and even influence current and future trends in the contemporary world.

This paper explores the philosophical possibilities inherent in the modernization of Confucianism. At present, the core challenge faced by Confucianism is to find a path that will allow it to establish itself at the center of modern Chinese thought and society. This so-called modernization of Confucianism is primarily based on modern Western thought, which regards Confucianism as an explained object by

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seeing it in a passive role that is often labeled "explained" and "responsive." This, however, is quite awkward because modern society is principally a rebuttal of traditional society, but modern Chinese society has multiple roots. It can be seen as having taken shape as a deliberate refutation of many features of traditional Chinese thought and society, but it can also be seen as having taken shape as a response to a long history of civilizational encounters with modern Western thought and society. Moreover, since the roots of Confucianism were established in ancient China and were developed in traditional Chinese society, the realization that there are many incompatibilities between Confucianism and modern society cannot be ignored.

If the modernization of Confucianism means that it has to be reformed within the context of modern society, then the danger is that, if such efforts are not successful, it will either be rejected wholesale once and for all and relegated to history as a museum piece, or it will be forced to deny its philosophical foundations and no longer be recognized as Confucianism in any way. If the modernization of Confucianism means that Confucians themselves develop or change their own ideas towards modernization, then this hypothesis is also impossible because Confucianism and modernity are essentially incompatible. If the modernization of Confucianism means that Confucians critique modern questions, which is entirely possible, then the critique would be limited to values or ideology, which would have only academic significance, but be without any constructive practical significance.

The essential meaning and significance at stake in the modernization of Confucianism, if it is in fact a real possibility, is that it would offer a specifically modern Chinese (that is, Confucian) approach to be relied on for the critique of the dominant values and ideology that lie at the heart of modern society on a world-wide scale, and that would also have a constructive practical significance for society. Since the emergence of modern society is equal to a change in *Tian* 天 ("the world"), so *Dao* 道 ("the way") has also undergone change and transformation. If Confucianism can once again become the Dao for Chinese society, then it cannot just change on a superficial level of appearance and words; it must turn over a new leaf without denying its own theories. And let us not forget that the Confucianism of ancient Chinese society successfully adapted to traditional Chinese society.

On this point, there is a lot of debate. While nobody doubts the civilizational significance of Confucian thought, many people doubt that it can be modernized. If it is not possible, then all efforts to modernize it will only be for show—cutting the feet to fit the shoes—and it would end up being a kind of "counter-Confucianism." Confucianism embodies a powerful and universal world perspective; it is an "interpreter" and not an "interpreted." What I mean by "counter-Confucianism" is a Confucianism that becomes an "interpreted," one that will have lost its power to interpret *Tian* and be relegated to nothing more than a kind of local knowledge.

One central foundation of traditional Confucian thought is its constant call for internal introspection and theoretical reflection, which is based on the recognition that all humans possess what I call "theoretical capacity." Theoretical capacity refers to the explanatory power inherent in the human mind to gauge and assess the depth and width that any theory possesses. The explanatory power of theoretical

capacity is characterized by the ability to analyze, measure, assess, and finally articulate any theory within the terms of a specifically Confucian methodology grounded in a system of critique, one that is typically based on morality and/or aesthetics. The modern challenges posed to traditional Confucian thought make us realize that there were certain limitations in its theoretical capacity from the very beginning, because this is precisely what the encounter with the modern world has exposed.

If any theory is important, noble, or profound enough to deserve assessment and critique with respect to its aesthetic and moral effects, then theoretical capacity must consider each possibility it offers and each avenue of practical application; but it does so in the realm of pure theory first of all. To do so is to assess any of its possible shortcomings "without any standpoint" before it encounters practical challenges. Although every theory comes into being from with a specific historical context, theoretical capacity is nonetheless designed to extend beyond all historical contexts by situating that theory as a universal, and the ultimate standard against which theories are judged is universal validity. Therefore, a strong theory must be more universal than practical.

The overriding weaknesses in the design of Confucian thought as it finds itself in the modern world can be attributed to its shortcomings in relation to theoretical capacity. Theoretical capacity itself functions within its own practical and historical conditions, and the effectiveness of all Confucian theories as well as all assessments and critiques of them also relied on the historical (in this case, specifically Chinese) contexts in which they were situated. Confucian theoretical capacity and its practical conditions are nearly the same, and the effectiveness of its theories relies on their social context. So when facing new problems and conditions, it will fail in difficult situations. On the one hand, when conditions for practicing traditional Confucianism vanish, traditional theories will be useless; on the other hand, traditional Confucianism cannot explain problems outside of China. Limited conditions for its practice and local discourse clearly make it difficult to argue that it has universal authority.

With the disappearance of the historical conditions that allowed Confucianism to flourish in traditional China, Confucianism suffered a big hit from which it has not yet recovered. At present, its discourse and practice exist only in very limited conditions, and this makes it difficult to argue for its universal authority, validity, and relevance. Although traditional Confucianism is a kind of universal learning, the encounter with modern society has made abundantly clear that it was not designed to be universally effective, and to fall back on it as a habitually reflexive response to new problems and conditions can only end in embarrassment and failure. This is the real reason why traditional Confucianism is no longer attractive in the contemporary world. But this situation is not unique to Confucianism alone, because there are many examples from cultures around the world whose traditional ways of thought and practice have disintegrated in the encounter with the modern world. Is it possible that only modern theories are effective for dealing with the problems and challenges posed by modern society? On a potentially more disturbing level, we might also ask: is it possible that there is no longer a place for any

universal theory (philosophical, political, social, etc.), and all theories must themselves be relegated to local knowledge? Or is it only that all existing political and social theories have not reached a level of universal effectiveness in their theoretical design?

Perhaps it is impossible to have universally applicable political and social theories, but at least we can be assured that a strong theoretical capacity is extremely important. In the case of Confucianism, it is not possible for it to be a universally effective political and social explanation unless it undergoes a great theoretical breakthrough to improve its theoretical capacity and the conditions of its practice are widened.

However we might answer such questions, one consideration remains of paramount importance: the need to develop a strong theoretical capacity that is capable of assessing and critiquing the changes well underway in modern society. While Confucianism may or may not be able to provide a universal theory, it does in fact possess, or so I argue, the tools with which to forge such a theoretical capacity. But in order to do so, it must undergo fundamental improvements that take the conditions of modern society very seriously; and this is precisely what we mean by "the modernization of Confucianism."

A Response to Fei Xiaotong's "Confucian Paradox"

Fei Xiaotong's 1985 study provides strong arguments for the position that seriously doubts the possibility that traditional Confucianism can be modernized, either theoretically or practically, and he often refers to this as "China's problem." I understand him to be speaking to the perceived shortcomings of Confucianism's theoretical capacity, and it reveals a real and serious challenge to Confucian culture theoretically and practically. But Confucian scholars seem unwilling to respond to Fei Xiaotong's findings.

Fei's methodology is primarily anthropological in which he points out many problems with China's rural system, and he applies it first of all to the analysis of "peasant life in rural China" 乡土中国 (*xiangtuZhoingguo*) by observing *taxiang* 他乡 ("other land") in comparison to *bentu* 本土 ("homeland"). According to him, every known social form is invariability confronted with problems and challenges, and its ability to continue to exist entirely depends on its ability to manage such problems and challenges, but in traditional China's rural system, they were only covered over and not fundamentally resolved. Now, however, that rural system has been destroyed, and the historical conditions which could be used to manage problems have vanished. Here, Confucian culture is faced with a real, practical challenge, and Fei uses this as one arena to explore Confucianism's ability to deal with some of the practical challenges posed by modern society, but his findings go far beyond this.

We can use Fei's arguments as a starting point with which to more closely examine traditional Confucianism's theoretical shortcomings. Many times, a

problem becomes a bigger problem because it has not been anticipated, and this challenges the resources available to any well-established theoretical tradition of thought and practice; Confucianism is no different. In times of critical social and ideological change, whether the values held by any given theoretical system are morally sustainable or not is less of a serious issue (values will always controversial and open to debate) than the contradictions in it that are exposed by unanticipated challenges on a practical level. This is so because the recognition that a theoretical system is unable to manage unanticipated challenges is all too often its veritable death-knell and leads to its deconstruction. This in fact goes some way in explaining why so many traditional systems of thought and practice have not survived in modern society. When such traditional systems do manage to continue to exist, they typically do so by standing on false pretenses motivated by a kind of cultural nostalgia or naïve nativism; their continued existence is, therefore, a paradox.

Fei's most biting challenge to the modernization of Confucianism comes from his discovery of just this kind of paradox, which he calls "the Confucian paradox." It can be stated in this way: a theory or theoretical system (T) requires both a rule (R) and a practical strategy (S). But because S is often simply nothing more than an unaccountable offset of R, not every T can be fundamentally established. Thus, when Fei analyzes "the Confucian paradox," he points out that Confucianism is unable to found a universally valid moral system, so a universal Confucianism has never been established.

To put this in another way, let us recognize that Confucius held "benevolence" 仁 (*ren*) as a universal, but he was never able to articulate it once and for all. Fei argues that the reason for this is that, "in the system of interpersonal relations, there is no concept of morals beyond personal relations." Although Confucianism has ever argued for the universal validity of benevolence, still, every effort by Confucius to explain the essence of benevolence inevitably reverted to the "morally essential factors at play between one person and another," and this includes all of the primary Confucian virtues including "filial piety" 孝 (*xiao*), "loyalty" 忠 (*zhong*), "trust" 信 (*xin*), and so on, which are different from person to person. Therefore, Confucian virtues are not in fact universal principles, because any actual human society is built on specific, distinct, and separate kinds of human relations, and this leads Fei to write that "no universal standards can function as such, because people have to clearly ask who the person they are engaging is and what relationship they have to oneself, and only then a person can decide which standard to apply" (Fei 1985, 32–35). This is just another way to say that the universal validity of any principle will inevitably vanish in its application within any concrete social context. Fei's recognition of "the Confucian paradox" provides the wherewithal that he uses in his decisive attack against Confucianism's claims to have established universal standards of assessment or universal principles of practice, and this is a truly unavoidable but critical defect. Actually, Confucian scholars knew the significance of universal principles from the very beginning and it made them privately restless due to the ambiguity of universal principles seen in Confucians' unceasing

questioning of benevolence and their attempts to summarize "the one thread running through all his doctrines."

Fei's "Confucian paradox" is ambiguous in some important ways, not least of all because it ignores what can reasonably be recognized as a set of principles that just might in fact stand on a universal footing. Primary among them are the following statements of Confucius himself: "What you do not wish for yourself, *do not do to others*" 己所不欲勿施於人 (*jisuobuyuwushiyuren*) (*Analects* 15.23); "What a person wishes to achieve for himself, he helps others to achieve, and what he wishes to obtain for, he helps others to obtain" 己欲立而立人己欲達而達人 (*Analects* 6.30).

But let's return to the hard core of Fei's argument. This is the claim that theoretical universals cannot be universally realized in practice, and any act can itself serve to refute the theoretical knowledge which directs it, since every act is performed within a specific social context. This is the deconstruction I mentioned above: the act often refutes the theories which direct the act. But perhaps the true secret of Confucianism is that it never intended its principles to be universally applicable for all people in all contexts, and Confucius generally tended to direct his teachings to specific persons in specific relationships with other specific persons in specific contexts. Thus, the idea of "the human" in Confucian theory is not a singular, but a plural concept.

Can a plural concept be considered universal? Can we speak of qualified universals? I think that this question deserves further consideration, but in any event, Fei does have good reasons to suspect the universal validity of Confucian principles. Confucian theory, like any theory, is not above practical application, and assessments concerning the validity of its rules and precepts are never entirely unconnected to practical demonstrations of them: its meaning is always defined in its practice. Certainly, this problem is by no means an exclusive feature of Confucianism; in fact, most rules have such underlying problems. Here, I refer to Wittgenstein's profound analysis about rules: The real meaning of a rule can always be defined by a case in practice, and the case being applied decides the rule, and the rule should be different from people's imagination. Just as he said: "Tell me how you seek, I will tell you what you actually seek" (Wittgenstein 1975, p. 27).

The Family as the Basic Unit of Confucianism

According to Fei, the reason Confucianism is devoid of universal principles is because it restricts the meaning of moral actions in personal relationships to specific contexts. This smacks of a subjective morality that is grounded in egotism and self-interest and that is unqualified to support any system of universal principles. This recognition leads Fei to raise "the concentric circles" question (Fei 1985, 26–27).

Fei Xiaotong points out that there is no individualism in China, but there is egoism, and they are extraordinarily different. For a long time, Chinese society has

often been interpreted in terms of collectivism, which, according to the Western intellectual framework, is contrary to individualism, and it is said that the West mainly stresses individualism while China esteems collectivism. This, however, is a misleading interpretation of the nature of Chinese society and culture, and both individualism and collectivism are Western concepts that have little to nothing to do with Chinese culture. Nonetheless, according to these concepts, China can be said to lack collectivism even more than individualism. The reality is that China has two different types of cultural tendencies that are sometimes misinterpreted as individualism and collectivism but are actually quite different. The first one, similar to egoism, is the so-called "loose sand" principle, and the second, similar to collectivism, is the so-called "following the crowd" principle.

The principle of "following the crowd" is seemingly safe and astute, it is certainly not a wise strategy for social survival. People who "follow the crowd" do not lose more than others, and if they are lucky enough, they may also share the same benefits as others. If the crowd acts wrongly, then they hope to avoid penalties because the law does not punish a crowd. Even if the crowd has to bear the consequence of wrong behavior, it is a kind of "collective responsibility" which is borne by everyone. The crowd may even jointly persecute outstanding individuals in order to gain something for itself even though that which is gained is minimal. This is essentially different from a collectivism in which millions of people are all of one mind. If I have to say what the most prominent difference from collectivism is, I would say that the principle of "following the crowd" lies in attempting to involve people personally so that they can avoid responsibility. Because nobody dares to take any responsibility, therefore nobody does take any responsibility. But collectivism attempts to use faith to lure everybody into making sacrifices, therefore everybody has a responsibility. Acts without a sense of responsibility are dangerous. Just as the crowd theory points out, the behavior of the crowd seldom has positive value (Gustave Le Bon 2000; Moscovici 2003).

Next to the principle of "following the crowd" is the principle of "loose sand," in other words egoism. It is an extreme kind of negative selfishness. In modern Western society, those who single-mindedly strive to maximize personal benefits are selfish. Although this is disgusting, it is not despicable. There are varieties of selfishness, one of which is to shirk responsibility, and this is called egoism. Its desire to minimize losses surpasses its desire for profit; this kind of craven selfishness is very harmful. Because of egoism, an individual wants only profit, but not responsibility, and his strategy is to hide in the crowd. Egoism can also sometimes absorb elements of the principle of "following the crowd," which is quite possibly an important reason why the social ethics of Chinese society is comparatively weak. Still, it is a typical misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese society to read the principle of "following the crowd" as collectivism. "The crowd" is not the same as "the collective." Because it is not the collective, it is impossible for the crowd to develop its own independent strength. It has no organization and pursues no public undertakings; therefore, the most effective government for a crowd is dictatorship, which is the only form of power able to make the crowd work for the public. This is ironic because dictatorship seems to be the most effective way

of governance for the disordered "society of the crowd," although dictatorships themselves clearly have many serious shortcomings of their own. Nonetheless, it was the natural choice for traditional Chinese society, because the merging of the principles of "following the crowd" and egoism are the social and cultural conditions for the emergence of a dictatorship.

Although the egoism described by Fei Xiaotong belongs to the West in one sense, it quite accurately expresses one side of Chinese culture. Of course, when Chinese focus on themselves, their emphasis is not on the ego, but on the self. That said, they regard the body as the unit, or even a self-centered doctrine. Strictly speaking, the idea of one's self with individual boundaries is different from the idea of regarding the body as one's boundary in that what people try to pursue and defend differs according to different ideas. Those who emphasize the self as their boundary will be more concerned with political rights while those who regard the body as their boundary will mainly stress life and material profits. When people regard body and life as absolute values, their dedication to the spirit will decline, because spirit exists outside of the body and can be abandoned if necessary. Of course, Chinese culture does not just emphasize the body, it also emphasizes the relationship between the heart and the body. Body is indeed the boundary line of the self, while the heart starts from the self and can expand endlessly. With the body as the center, the heart is prepared to measure the relationship between the self and all the other people and things (close or strange, same or different, enemy or friends, etc.). Although the heart is thought to be the most important part of a person, the body's limitations cannot match the limitlessness of the heart, so there is a big dilemma.

Fei raises the image of "the concentric circles," which concerns the limits of the body as egotism next to the limitlessness of the heart as benevolence. He vividly applies this image to water waves in his effort to explain two different and competing standards of Chinese morality: either as individual egoism and selfishness which is regarded as the standard (a person who behaves according to egoism will always say, "I want to but I cannot" to other people's difficulties), or as public spiritedness (that is, benevolence). Public mindedness or spiritedness is found at the center of the water waves, and it will gradually weaken or strengthen in proportion to the distance of the personal and contextualized relationships between any two persons at any given moment, much like the concentric waves of water around the center. As the waves move further from the center, so people who want to serve the public may feel unable to do so because their hearts are restrained by their bodies. This limits the development of the spirituality of their heart, whereby their hearts become more and more restrained by their bodies the further they get from the center. So although neo-Confucians make up unbelievable moral stories about the heart, the heart's spiritual pursuit is in vain because of the body's confinement.

Fei's image of water waves outwardly expanding describes the value order of the Chinese, from the freedom of the heart to dedicate itself to benevolence, to the restraints upon that dedication imposed by the body. The value order is the key to the value question, and the value question is a question of the value order. The seriousness of the value order question (from benevolence to selfishness to

heartlessness) is that only the first value is effective, and the subsequent ones become completely devalued and insignificant when people have to make a choice. Fei describes this as: "A person can sacrifice his family for himself, his party for his family, his nation for his party, and the world for his nation," and public spirit-edness has become oriented to personal benefit.

But Confucianism could never accept such sentiments. The point is that those who say that they have moral principles do not really live by those morals; only actual practice has the last word, and in the end, "saying" needs to be proved by "doing." I believe that Fei misreads Confucianism's universalistic foundations by interpreting it from the individual perspective. He thinks that Confucianism's interpretation of moral practice from the individual's perspective not only resolves the universality of moral principles, but also eventually and logically turns morals into individual benefit. Whether in theory or in practice, Confucians will never admit the logic of "if one does not benefit him, he will not be tolerated by Heaven and Earth." While Confucian thought recognizes without hesitation that selfish impulses are an undeniable component of human existence, it nonetheless unswervingly affirms that benevolence is rooted in human nature, and it is capable of placing strict restraints on private interest. What the roots of benevolence offer is a kind of antidote to private interest that can be channeled to love and commitment to family, community, nation, and, in its deepest expansion, world. Confucianism begins with concern for the family, but generalizes that participation to wider levels of levels of social existence. Benevolence is the starting point for restraining selfishness, and it also makes one conscious of the fact that any person is a member of something bigger than oneself.

Confucianism is built on a very penetrating ethical design, and it begins with attention to the goodness of human nature. While it recognizes the reality of natural human selfishness, it also encourages us to restrain it to an acceptable level in order to overcome the conflicts it can cause. Following the urges of the body all too easily can lead a person into extreme selfishness, but Confucianism also believes that calling upon something transcendent to help us to restrain it is in vain because any such transcendent principle or being is difficult to locate and unreliable at best. Knowing that selfishness is a cause of conflict, Confucianism looks to the family, a social unit which can sometimes also be overly concerned with its own private profit, but at the same time it is also a social unit that can go beyond private profit. Thus, it is the starting point for restraining selfishness. Generally speaking, if one person harms his family's profit, he also harm his own profit at the same time, so the family becomes a strong reason to organize around common benefit. Because of this, Confucianism attempts to transpose the basic family structure onto other levels of society. Although there are some difficulties, I believe that the social design of Confucianism is very wise.

With these considerations in mind, I want to point out two weaknesses in Fei's reading of Confucianism, even as I recognize that his analysis remains deep and revealing.

(1) The basic unit that Confucianism uses to calculate advantages, profit, power, and responsibility is a social one (the family), not a natural one (e.g., the individual). The importance of family, whether for profit or responsibility, is higher than that of its individual members, and the biggest moral flaw is for a person to value himself more than his family. The starting point for the series of transmissions described by Fei Xiaotong as "people may sacrifice Y for the sake of X…" should not be the individual but the family, and this is the correct expression of the value order of Confucianism. From the perspective of social function, if there is just one level, whether it is the family or community, that can effectively restrain private desires in a controlled state, then it is considered successful. That is the reason why Confucian society was able to maintain such a long, stable existence. Confucians believe that the family is the most objective condition for building harmonious relationships, so they attempt to make every unit at every level of society an imitation of the family structure. This is the profound significance of the triadic "family-nation-world." And it is also the brilliance of Confucianism because the advantages of a family can be understood and easily accepted, and it is not beyond an ordinary person's grasp.

(2) Even though traditional Chinese society is built on a system of moral values, this by itself does not give the whole picture because Confucianism also emphasizes politics; that is, it merges ethics and politics into its total structure. Ethics, expressed as "family-nation-world," is insufficient to ensure social harmony, and politics, expressed as "nation-community-family," is another important condition that works for the same end but from the other direction cooperation (it is a question that I discussed in *Tian Xia Tixi* 天下体系 ("The World System"). In the ethical order of "family-nation-world," family is the original ethical form that expands from family to nation to world, and the political order of "world-nation-family" that focuses on the principles of governance contracts from world to nation to family, and this explains the bi-directional commingling of ethics and politics within the complete Confucian society, like the "water-waves" I described above. The nation differs from the family because it demands a much wider vision (even as wide as the world); it is the most "public" without any boundaries and urges a perspective from selflessness. This selfless range of vision is obviously not the same as the view of the family, which is close to a person's life. It requires an open mind to look beyond selfishness, so it is not within the ordinary person's range of vision, it is the outlook of superior persons or even for sages. Let us also note that Confucius always had two solutions for various problems, one for ordinary people and the other for outstanding people.[1] Therefore, the concept of family and world constitute a kind of balance between public and private.

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[1]"Double solutions" in the Confucian style are always interesting. For instance, the solution to the problem of death or immortality: the solution for ordinary people is to have offspring, and the solution for outstanding people is to leave their name in history.

Fei Xiaotong's "Confucian paradox" is partially effective and challenging, but because he situates the individual at the center of Confucianism, he misreads it. To recognize this, however, is only to shift the problem, and I bring forward a more complete understanding of Confucianism which asks: is it possible to forge the total structures of a harmonious society from the family pattern? Can the family pattern be transferred onto a total society? This is a difficult problem for Confucianism. If Confucians want to generalize a social pattern based on the family pattern, there needs to be more conditions, and the problem of transmission is an important technical problem in Confucian society that has not been completely resolved.

On "Inner Sageliness" and "Outer Kingliness"

The problem of institution is still the most difficult problem in contemporary China. When Confucius declared that he "follows the Zhou Dynasty," he had politics in mind more than ethics, but he did not then go on to further develop any of their political theories or say anything more about their political structures. His central concern was family ethics, which he often placed above political issues and political participation, and later Confucians mostly followed him in this. On the one hand, they attempted to solve political and social issues by calling upon ethics first of all; on the other hand, they explored the foundations of ethics by attending to the heart and human nature. This left Confucianism with some serious holes that lied dormant until the confrontation with modern society exposed them.

It is illusory to support a giant entity with weak foundations, with the hope to conquer big problems. The biggest mistake of contemporary Chinese thought is to regard Confucianism and other schools of traditional Chinese thought as a complete product, finished once and for all. To do so makes it impossible to improve Confucianism, and this is especially so with respect to its modernization. Only when Confucianism is regarded as an unfinished, imperfect theory, a system open to further development, will it be ready for modern society, and we will find that there are many modern problems that it will be equipped to deal with. Private interest, selfishness, is one of them.

Selfishness originates from the body, the natural unit, and the nature of selfishness determines that selfishness is an unavoidable basic social problem. The central problem that every political and ethical theory has to contend with is the problem of selfishness and private interest. This problem can never be solved once and for all because selfishness stubbornly exists and it is impossible to eliminate; at best, it can simply be contained. Selfishness cannot control itself, so conquering it is an illusion. If all people are innately selfish, and if all people also have an innate conscience, then the conscience should be able to contain selfishness, but this is clearly not the case. The conscience cannot improve itself simply on its own effort; it must depend on outer strength; in other words, "inner sageliness" depends on "outer kingliness." In order to contain selfishness, it is necessary to establish some

kind of institution to serve as the source of outside strength. Generally speaking, there are three ways to contain selfishness.

(1) To contain selfishness (private interest) by using selfishness. This solution attempts to contain selfishness by protecting individual rights and limiting power. From a realist perspective, it is an effective institutional solution in the modern West. Although the containment of selfishness by selfishness effectively prevents many bad things, it also prevents many good things; it is not the best, but it is not the worst. Individual rights serve as the basic grounds for definitions of value, whereby anything can become sacrosanct with the consent of legal institutions. However, there is no society that can bear the weight of unlimited rights, and this solution may collapse under its own weight.

(2) To use selfishness to fulfill selfishness. This solution attempts to maximize public interest as the necessary condition for maximizing private interest, and it represents the traditional Confucian response to selfishness in terms of harmony. But there is a paradox in it: to have people feel that fulfilling selfishness in a public interest is worthy, the scope of such practices must be limited to and implemented in a relatively small social unit (the family). If the social unit is too big (the nation), certain privileged people of low public-mindedness will unfairly benefit, while if the unit is too small (the person), individual interest will dominate social life. It is Fei Xiaotong's finding that the public-mindedness established through "outward transmission" is weak. Hence, Chinese forms of politics and society are still an unresolved problem. But note that even this does not resolve the problem of integrating ethics and politics.

(3) Turn public interest into private interest. This solution represents a utopian ideal by which public undertakings are taken as the ultimate concern of individuals, in which the public takes absolute priority over the private. This solution is impractical because there are hardly any such charming public undertakings. Even if this solution is possible, it would be very dangerous because it usually demands some kind of religion or ideology that can control the soul or mind and make people believe that the public interest is preferable to individual interests. This solution is typically driven by ideologies such as Communism, and it requires people to value a larger unit (the state) over the smaller unit (the family).

The key to a successful institution lies in its ability to contain selfishness. Confucianism, however, has not yet formulated an adequate solution for selfishness that responds to the challenges of modern society. Although Confucianism has some outstanding ideals, it is an unfinished project. The strength of Confucianism's solution, with ethics as the dominant factor, is too weak, and the problem of selfishness cannot be solved by the moral education of the heart or the mind by way of an internal transcendence (an unscientific concept) because the body cannot be taught to be giving. It should go without saying that any Confucian solution will continue to prioritize ethics ("inner sageliness"), but on their own, ethical systems are insufficient to contain selfishness in modern society. For Confucianism to be

modernized, it will have to develop a more trenchant body of theory that responds to the position of institution ("outer kingliness") in modern conditions. Confucianism possesses such theory, but it remains unfinished.

The Challenge for Modern Confucianism

The power of Confucian ethics mainly relies on what Wang Qingjie has called "model ethics" (Wang 2004: 247), which is applicable to a model society. The strength of ethics, especially Chinese ethics, mainly relies on such a model. It is not important what the shaped model looks like; the important thing is that the moral "model" is also a successful social "model". If not, the "model" will lose its charm because people are more interested in profit. So, the problem of the "model" exposes a deep institutional problem: if an institution cannot harmonize morality and profit, it will be a failed society. Confucians wish people to follow the model of virtuous people, but it is impractical because social institutions have rarely allowed moral people to enjoy beneficial profit; more often, they benefits suffer. The inability to integrate morality and benefit weakens the political and moral strength of Confucianism to a large degree. It is not very important what an ideology or mainstream discourse regards highly, the important point is the preference actually encouraged by its rewards, whereby continuing to do things the way they have traditionally been done is encouraged by certain incentives. If the mainstream discourse declares that moral people are honorable and immoral people are shameful, but immoral people actually profit more than moral people, it contrarily proves that immoral people are honorable. So the question becomes, is there an institution that can promote morals more than profit? Is there an institution that can make morals the necessary condition for profit-making? If not, then goodness will lose its charm, but there is nothing more difficult than establishing this sort of institution. Confucius is clear about this problem, but he cannot solve it.

The encounter with modern society has exposed the institutional weakness in traditional Confucianism: if a society cannot harmonize morality and selfishness, it will fail. Confucianism encourages people to be moral, but social institutions rarely allow moral people to benefit. The social incompatibility between morality and benefit is difficult to integrate, and modern Confucianism's inability to achieve this integration has taken a toll. The outstanding questions at stake in the modernization of Confucianism are these: If morality is honorable and immorality is shameful, yet immorality is far more profitable that morality, then how can a modern society promote morality over profit? What incentives are there for morality? How can a modern society provide benefit for morality? Can modern society establish morality as the necessary condition for profit and benefit? Even Confucius understood that there is nothing more difficult than establishing this sort of society, but he did not know how to achieve it.

The ancient people believed that Dao will not change if Heaven does not change, so we might infer that the Dao will change if Heaven can changed. The advent of

modern society marks a change in Heaven. In this age, a change in Dao would be equivalent to a kind of re-culturing whereby all basic problems must be rethought. In this sense, we have to revamp Confucianism if we want to fully develop its outstanding ideas within the context of the challenges posed to it by the modern world.

To renew Confucianism requires first of all that we recover its universal range without at the same time seeking a return to ancient Confucianism. A new way of applying its resources to universal problems and future problems must be found. I mean, Confucianism must be made universally applicable instead of remaining locked into local knowledge. We can ask again what the changeless Heaven is and what the future Heaven may be, or in other words, what universal problems are and what future society's major problems will be.

At the same time, renewing Confucianism means abandoning its negative stance as "the interpreted" and to recover its positive place as "the interpreter," whereby Confucianism can be used to analyze all political problems and explain every society in the world. If Confucianism cannot explain every potential political problem, then Confucianism cannot be a universally valid theory.

In order to achieve the two goals I expressed above, it is necessary to strengthen Confucianism's theoretical framework, and to improve its analytical framework and methodology. Such a technical task is directed to the weakest link in Confucianism.

The "world system" theory I have conceived in recent years represents my effort to explore these issues. Such an effort tries to show that it is possible to establish an effective analytical framework on institutions and values from a Chinese point of view, with Chinese thought in the dominant place, by establishing a framework of universal knowledge. Perhaps it is a prerequisite to understanding future society with its own Heaven and its own Dao. Of course, my theory needs further study and criticism. It is important for Confucianism to choose a new stance with universal characteristics, at least for any universalism and its future orientation, and for it to be in accord with the nature of Confucianism rather than simply the modernization of Confucianism.

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