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The Role and Possible Revival of Confucianism in Modern China

A popular topic of discussion today amongst scholars, philosophers, and socio-political scientist's today is over the revivalism of Confucianism in today's Modern China. Many believe that the values and ideals of Confucianism are resurfacing on a national scale and could possibly take over as China's new form of government or state religion. There is no doubt that the values of Confucianism still hold a place in Chinese culture and history, but the notion of Confucianism potentially growing in popularity and support enough to be the new source of political and religious power is unlikely. This paper seeks to prove that while Confucianism is potentially coming back as a guideline for family values in an attempt to combat the effects of modernization brought upon China in the past half century, it will never match the power and influence it once held. By examining China's history, as well as its current socio-political structure and values, and analyzing the change in Confucianism's role and influence it becomes abundantly clear that Confucianism can never be what it once was.

To say something is making a revival means that it is returning to the same position of power and influence it once had, but what is pinnacle position of power and influence for Confucianism? Studying the progression of Confucianism to find this only results in a muddled

pool of different versions of this evasive philosophy (or religion) once called Confucianism. Each time Confucianism rises and falls with the roller coaster ride of China's changing Dynasties it loses its individual properties and integrity as its own religious and governmental entity. Some examples of these different variations of Confucianism to be discussed are Han Confucianism, Dao-Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and New Confucianism. Through sequential review of these four resurgence, a pattern of decreasing power and conformity to the practice of Confucianism becomes evident.

Confucianism began around 1043 BC during the Zhou Dynasty as both a form of governance and popularly practiced spiritual tradition. Certain practices, Li (rites/rituals) in particular, were used by the Duke of Zhou to render loyalty and respect from his vassals and other members of the community (Zhou 624). The former half of the Zhou Dynasty, also known as the Spring-Autumn period, was a time of shattered governance and a free-for-all for power. It is estimated that at certain times of the Spring-Autumn Period upwards of 400 political powers were governing at once throughout China. Along with the political unrest was an influx of new forms of philosophy concerning humanity, spirituality, and governance such as Daoism and Legalism (Zhou 623). Confucianism emerged as the most popular and widely used of these different schools perhaps due to its peaceful nature and ultimate strive for harmony. This was very enticing to both rulers and people who were sick of the violence brought about by the mass schism. Also, because of the smaller size of the communities, the ideals of Confucianism such as creating very close knit interpersonal relationship which radiate throughout the community was much more feasible.

This first form Confucianism evident during this period can be marked by religious and social characteristics alike. As a form of governance, Confucianism operated off of moral

obligations in the form of Li, Ren, and the filial piety as taught by Confucius. A strong community must be built from the bottom up starting with the family with the intentions of being harmonious and treating others as you wish to be treated (Zhou 621). There were no God's honored such as other religions but there was still forms of divinity and the belief of Sages Kings, or mystical beings who emulate the values of Confucius (Woo 484).

This peaceful and passive form of Confucianism last throughout the centuries until the end of the Warring Periods, which marks the beginning of the Qin Dynasty and unification of China through Legalism (Zhou 624). In sharp contrast to Confucianism, Legalism was an extremely harsh form of ruling which believed in the power of the ruler over all else and used extreme forms of punishment to maintain civility and control. Most detrimental to Confucianism in terms of power and establishment in today's time was the burning of all its writings (except one copy) by the first emperor (Woo 500). It was not until the start of the Han Dynasty a few decades later that Confucianism would be revived.

This new variation known as Han Confucianism is not much different from original form, but different none the less. Han Confucianism held all the same virtues as Confucianism with an added fifth virtue of truthfulness which to them was vital in transcending the powers of both Heaven and Earth (Woo 500). It was also similar in the sense that Han Confucianism called for the betterment of the people over the ruler, except that now it was more social and economic forms as education and provisions for the pursuit of happiness. Confucianism was still a form of religion at this point, even having diviners within the Han courts.

Han Confucianism held strong for nearly four centuries until around 220 B.C.E, when it began to be replaced by Buddhism and Daoism. This period for Confucianism is known as the Dao-Confucianism fitting to the fact that it almost lost its own identity being fused together with

Daois, and would not emerge as a major influence in China for nearly 800 years with the emergence of Neo-Confucianism.

Neo-Confucianism began in the Song Dynasty (960 AD) when Daoism was stripped of its power in the Courts. This is perhaps the first major change in Confucianism in terms of it losing its own identity. After nearly a millennium of Buddhist and Daoist influence, Neo-Confucianism was now marked with ideals and values of both as demonstrated by forms of meditation and other Buddhist practices urged by leaders of the time (Woo 518). It is important to note that Neo-Confucianism was only now a revival of Confucian rules of governance, Buddhism was and remained the state religion of China.

As stated earlier, the measure of the revival of Confucianism should be looked at in terms of both government and religion. With Buddhism effectively knocking Confucianism out as the religion in China, Confucianism only remained influential through its governance. The values of humaneness, honesty, benevolence, and compassion were replaced by nationalism, citizen rights, and human welfare. Thus, when China was defeated by both Britain and Japan, this new State-Confucianism took the bulk of the blame for China's defeat and lost all credibility over the next half-century when it was completely replaced by Republic of China in 1911 (Woo 523).

With State-Confucianism being replaced by an entire new government and having no religious ground to stand on, it has been reduced to nothing more but a sort of relic representing an idealistic longing for a harmonious society (New Confucianism). It becomes clear that Confucianism has dropped from a plateau of influence it will never reach again. Confucianism has been molded and altered and influenced by so many outside influences that it no longer as its own defining features. When someone says that Confucianism is making a comeback, there is no real meaning. Confucianism in its truest and original form means treating everyone like

extended family and doing everything necessary to maintain a harmonious society; following the rites and rituals of Li, and maintaining ren throughout all relationships. While this may still be the driving force behind family values at the micro level, it will never flourish into a state-wide movement; China will never declare themselves under Confucian rule again.

Proponents of Confucianism within a modern nationalistic China include Daniel Bell, a highly renowned Confucian scholar, professor, and author. He believes that although some aspects of nationalism directly oppose those of Confucianism like that of *Tanxia*, Confucianism can still be used as an influential power within a nationalistic government. *Tanxia* is a Confucian ideal of creating a borderless land whose dominion is based off of those who follow Confucian ideals (Bell 40). According to true Confucian ideals, those who are not a part of *Tanxia* are considered Barbarians. With nationalism comes the idea of segregating people strictly by geographic location rather than belief. Bell argues, however, that *Tanxia* can be adopted and altered slightly to say that Confucians seek *Tanxia* when the nation is secured and in a non-chaotic state. In other words, when China is secure on the world level as a state, they can then shift their focus to living under the harmonistic lifestyles of Confucianism. Conversely, so long as China remains at ends with other states and has to defend its state, *Tanxia* can be set to the side until it is secured (Bell 41). While this does make sense and it is a smart adaptation to the borders created by nationalism, it is yet another example of true Confucianism and its values being stripped of its intended identity.

An example of what happens when Confucianism drops its own identity is in Japan, the only other country besides China to adopt Confucianism. It was used as a political philosophy in conjunction with nationalism. The pioneer of the Confucius movement into Japans politics, Inouc Tetsujiro, declared Confucianism a philosophy aimed to guide political discussions

(Paramore 278). The religious aspects and traditions were completely dropped and Confucianism was nothing but an empty term which could be used to support nationalistic values. Confucius' ideas of creating harmony with your neighbors and having loyalty to your family and close ones in pursuit of a harmonious society was now converted to supporting your neighbors, and community to promote the welfare of the state. While this discussion focuses on China, Japan is an example of Confucianism changing from what it was to what it is now broadly interpreted as. Confucianism as practiced throughout the Han Dynasty was a form of government used to benefit the people. Even though responsibility was placed on all of the people to live harmoniously a large component was the belief that the ruler aims to help the people. Nationalism puts nation over the people and thus completely reverses the roles of government and people.

The 1970's China entered into its third period, The Modernization Period, stimulated by its huge economic growth. According to Dr. Cui Hongjian, the large economic growth and modernization in China in the past 40 years has caused a significant shift away from the Confucian ideals of social harmony, community, and relationships. The government was driven by the economic growths causing China to lose some of its ancient ideals. These ideals were replaced by one common goal: to make money. In his speech at The Last Chance for Humanity conference in Germany, Dr. Hongjian reported that, "According to the per-capita income, China is still a poor country," meaning that while China as a nation experienced economic growth, only a fraction of the population actually reaped the benefits. This brings up the paradox between Confucianism and today's modern world. So long as China is a global economic player and is motivated by the world market, it will always be directly at odds with Confucian ideals.

Confucianism is an ancient tradition which has played a vital part in the growth and development of China and its people. It instills a core set of values and beliefs based off of the hope for humanity. Throughout the more than 2000 of its enduring existence Confucianism has served as one of China's core schools of training and served as the guide for morality for millions of people. Dr. Hongjian may have summed up its role when he said, "Confucianism should be regarded as the Classical Face for all of Chinese culture." Confucianism as a set of ideals will always be regarded as one of the main steeples in Chinese culture with its basic humanistic principles serving as the doctrines for interpersonal relationships. However, so long as China remains an industrious economic nation, the values of Confucianism will never match those needed by Chinese leadership. With a population of nearly 1.5 billion, a form of government based solely off of moral obligation and promotion of social harmony is nothing but an idealistic dream.

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