

The Restoration of Confucianism in China and Japan

A New Source of Morality and Religion

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The restoration of Confucianism in contemporary China began with the economic reforms of the late 1970s. Aside from the authority of Mao Ze-dong, there was a need to fill the vacuum that existed in peoples' beliefs; although Confucianism had been oppressed throughout modern Chinese history, it was at this point that the restoration of Confucianism occurred. This Confucianism plays an important part in affording legitimacy to the current political power. If we look at the phrase “harmonized society” that has been used by the Chinese Communist Party since 2006, we can discern that “harmony” as a new Confucian value has become a slogan for political power.

How can this restored Confucianism be defined? It is a belief in Chinese cultural traditions and values, although it is difficult to say that it is a religion. The Chinese Communist Party has a principle of laicization or secularization to separate religion from the public sphere, and this is why there is a struggle with terminology. In place of *rujiao* (儒教, Confucianism), which is understood as a religion, *ruxue* (儒学, Confucian scholarship) is often used in scholarship to maintain universal values such as philosophy or education. What is needed for political legitimacy is not

rujiao, but the secular teaching of *ruxue* to affect people at their very core.

Nevertheless, the definition of Confucianism as a religion is still influential but complicated, as Confucianism is regarded both as religious and non-religious. According to Gan Chun-song, on a theoretical level, there are three important discussions (GAN 2008, 15–25).

First, Jiang Qing evokes the notion of a Confucian state. He claims that the most important issue is to reconstruct the legitimacy of Chinese politics, but to do so, Western democracy is not sufficient, and thus it is necessary to construct Chinese state policies based on Confucianism (JIANG 2003, 125–7). In his framework, Confucianism will occupy the position of the constitution (JIANG 2004). This may be called “Confucian fundamentalism.”

Second, Kang Xiao-guang discusses making Confucianism a state religion. He insists that we need “Confucianization” at every level: Confucianization of the Communist Party into a confucianist community; Confucianization of Marxism-Leninism into the “Way of Confucius and Mencius”; and Confucianization of society with confucianism as a state religion (KANG 2005, XLIV–LII). Once such Confucianization is realized, it can be said that

in this age of globalization, to restore Confucianism is not only to construct a base for the sacred and cultural legitimacy of Chinese politics, but also to construct a base for a ‘cultural China’ that transcends nation states, and a revolution in the human world. This is the historical mission of the Chinese nation in the age of globalization. (KANG 2005, 141–2)

The two discussions above aim to reconstruct Confucianism as a religion and to institutionalize it in the political sphere. They regard Confucianism as a specifically Chinese cultural value which can only be reappropriated by China. In this regard, it seems reasonable for Gan to criticize them by claiming that

such a Confucian system might limit various possibilities of the practice and development of a Confucian spirit, and if Confucianism and China are closely united, it might also restrict Confucianism, although

there may be the possibility of transcending a limited national spirit. (GAN 2008).

In this way, Gan refers to the third discussion on Confucianism as a “civil religion.”

CONFUCIANISM AS A “CIVIL RELIGION” IN CHINA

Chen Ming argues for a civil religion as if he tries to escape the difficulties caused by the above two views (that is, the ambiguity in defining religion and the violation of the principle of laicization to separate religion from the public sphere):

If someone states that Confucianism is a religion, that person will face many theoretical difficulties; if the same person states that Confucianism is a *civil* religion, it may be far less problematic. Therefore, if one doesn’t mind the concept of civil religion being closely related to the American social situation, and understands the concept of “civil” as public regardless of its modern background, it is not an overstatement to say that China is a state where civil religion is fully developed. (CHEN 2007)

Here Chen is referring to “American civil religion,” the phrase used by Robert Bellah. According to Bellah, American civil religion and God are closely related to American history:

The God of civil religion is not only rather “unitarian,” he is also on the austere side, much more related to law, order, and right than to salvation and love. Even though he is somewhat deist in cast, he is by no means simply a watchmaker God. He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America. (BELLAH 1970, 175)

American civil religion is restricted to American citizens whose range is historically determined. A logic of exclusion is always present among those who do not believe in this civil religion or those who are not regarded as citizens. That is behind Chen’s view of civil religion:

Civil religion in the United States of America is constructed on the

basis of what white, Christian culture narrates. Civil religion in China is a natural consolidation of the cultural traditions of the Han people in political life. (CHEN 2007)

Chen regards civil religion in China as a form of the Chinese experience within the framework of a natural consolidation of the cultural traditions of the Han people in political life. Those who do not belong to this cultural tradition could be excluded from being followers of civil religion. Even if “harmony” is regarded as a core value in Confucianism, it is no less than a harmony of the Han people and for the Han people. Such logic of exclusion has always haunted the idea of civil religion. If we look back at Rousseau’s concept of civil religion we can find the original logic of exclusion:

There is, however, a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is the duty of the sovereign to determine, not exactly as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or a faithful subject. Without having the power to compel any one to believe them, the sovereign may banish from the state whoever does not believe them; it may banish him not for being impious, but as unsociable, as incapable of sincerely loving law and justice, and of sacrificing his life to his duty. But if any one, after publicly acknowledging these dogmas, behaves like an unbeliever in them, he should be punished with death; he has committed the greatest of crimes, he has lied before the laws. (ROUSSEAU 1895, 227–8)

Rousseau describes how a person who does not believe in civil religion can be banished from the state because he or she is “incapable of sincerely loving law and justice, and of sacrificing at need his life to his duty.” From this description, we can deduce two characteristics of civil religion: it is intolerant of the unbeliever and it contains a logic of sacrifice at its core.

If we understand civil religion as Bellah and Rousseau understood it, will Confucianism as a Chinese civil religion become a modern doctrine for Han people and thus carry out the logic of sacrifice? There may be no decisive answer to this question right now, yet we can learn something

from the experience of prewar Japan, where there was another attempt to use Confucianism as a civil religion.

RELIGION, PRACTICE, AND MORALITY IN PREWAR JAPAN

Before discussing civil religion in prewar Japan, we need to confirm the meaning of “religion” and “morality” in modern-day Japan. Once the search was made in non-Western countries for an authority not grounded in “religion” *per se*, there was an attempt to change cultural resources and to construct something religious in them. This is referred to as quasi-religion, meta-religion, or para-religion, and is not religion *per se* but ethics or morality. Instead of religion, “national ethics” or a “national morality” was constructed to legitimize authority. Isomae remarks concerning Japan’s reception of the Western concept of religion:

There were two translations of “religion” between the end of the Edo era and the beginning of Meiji. One was *shūshi* (宗旨) or *shūmon* (宗門), stressing the meaning of practice in religion; the other was *kyōhō* (教法), *seidō* (聖道), or *shūkyō* (宗教), stressing the meaning of belief. The former was more prevalent and popular than the latter because it was connected with the pre-modern Japanese religious system. The latter was limited to a circle of intellectuals who had knowledge of canons and tenets. *Shūkyō* was also not exceptional. Inoue Tetsujirō had pointed out that “the term *shūkyō* was seldom used before the Meiji Restoration.” However, *shūkyō* was finally adopted as the translation of the term “religion,” and so an inverse phenomenon arose whereby the minority term stressing beliefs such as *shūkyō* surpassed the dominant term stressing practices such as *shūshi* or *shūmon*. (ISOMAE 2003, 36)

Modern Japan’s reception of religion shifted from a doctrine of practice to that of belief in the 1880s. If we consider this background, Protestantism played an important role in the shift at that time, and “took a severe position of belief-centralism, with a rejection of ritualistic elements” (37). In this shift, even an established religion such as Buddhism had a tendency to oppress the practical and to stress belief.

In fact, Buddhist sects tried to escape from their ritual-centralized manner known as “funeral Buddhism.” They philosophized and dogmatized their system following Christianity, and thus began to praise the ethical characters of the founders of sects such as Shinran 親鸞 and Nichiren 日蓮. On the other hand, in 1872, *shugenshū* (修驗宗), which relied on prayer rituals, was abolished. In other words, magic rituals aiming at mundane interests were excluded from Buddhism. (ISOMAE 2003, 40)

Soon after the exclusion of the practical, religion as a belief was once again challenged. In the late 1880s, when the separation of religion from the political sphere occurred in Japan, religion as a belief was reduced to the private realm. Isomae notes that

what had been discussed before as “teachings” were re-divided into two realms: a private realm called “religion” being consigned to the individual’s free discretion; and a public realm called “morality” being imposed as a national obligation. (48)

In this new distinction between religion as a private realm and morality (ethics) as a public realm, Shinto and Confucianism were grouped into the latter. The idea that Shinto was not a religion was a well-known definition in prewar Japan, which should be understood within this history of re-division. If we use the phrase “civil religion” here, Shinto was turned into State Shinto as a civil religion that was separate from religion with private beliefs.

WATSUJI TETSURŌ: CONFUCIANISM’S TEACHING AS THE WAY OF HUMANITY

The above-mentioned situation was similar to Confucianism. Confucianism in prewar Japan, which was always amalgamated with State Shinto, was defined as a teaching of ethics or morality and not as a religion. Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) discerned the typical discourse defining Confucianism as a teaching of ethics.

Watsuji described Confucius as one of the “teachers of humankind” but distinct from other teachers such as Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus, in

that he never touched on the problem of death, nor did his biography include any story about his death (WATSUJI 1962, 337–40). The result was that the core doctrine of Confucius did not consist of a “religious God” but of a “way of humanity”:

It was sufficient [for Confucius] to understand and realize the Way. The Way is a Way of humanity, not the words of a God or a way to enlightenment. No fear or anxiety afflicted him if he followed the ethical way of humanity, that is, if he realized humaneness and practiced loyalty and tolerance. That is why his doctrine had no need for mysteries of any shade, no demand to “believe by virtue of the absurd” (*credo quia absurdum*). The Way is completely a way of reason. The most remarkable characteristic of the doctrine of Confucius is his recognition that the Way of humanity is significant on an absolute level. (WATSUJI 1933, 344)

For Watsuji, Confucianism was not a religion with a transcendent God, but a doctrine rooted in the everyday to carry out human ethics. This image of Confucianism was not an isolated one, but prevalent in prewar Japan.

HATTORI UNOKICHI: PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGIOSITY IN CONFUCIAN TEACHING

Before Watsuji, Hattori Unokichi (1867–1939), a specialist in Chinese philosophy, played a large role in constructing an image of Confucianism as the teaching of ethics. First, he distinguished Confucian teaching (孔子教) from Confucianism (儒教). For Hattori, Confucianism was originally a local ethic for the Chinese people, but after Confucius appeared, he changed it into a universal doctrine that spread throughout East Asian countries and reached as far as Western countries (HATTORI 1938, 118). According to Hattori, the difference between Confucianism and Confucian teaching is the difference between religion and ethics:

Thought before Confucius had many religious elements. After Confucius established his teaching, it became more theoretical and ethical, its religious character diminished. (Hattori 1939, 32)

In this regard, Hattori criticized Watsuji's contemporary arguments for defining Confucianism as a religion. He took up two examples: Kang Youwei's *Confucian Teaching: Kongzi Jiao*, and Dr. H. Giles's definition of Confucianism. They mistook Confucianism for a religion because they dealt with Confucianism in comparison with Christianity (2–9).

Hattori's argument was not simple, however. He did not entirely reduce his Confucian teaching to ethics as Watsuji did. He tried to find a new type of religiosity at the core of Confucian teaching:

Primitive Confucianism was quite religious, but Confucius turned it into an ethical teaching—yet the Teaching of Confucius is neither limited to the realm of mundane human matters nor ignorant of what is beyond them, as Huang Kan 皇侃 had asserted. The fundamental belief of Confucius is religious. (90–1)

Here Hattori referred to old and new types of religiosity: primitive Confucianism and Confucian teaching. What is the difference between the two? We can say that new religiosity is a “philosophical religiosity”:

Ancient ceremonies were altogether religious, but Confucius explained the meaning of ceremony from a wholly ethical point of view. Ancient ceremonies existed to bring fortune or avoid misfortune by the power of the gods, but Confucius preached only that we repay the fundamental favors of our ancestors. Still, Confucius deeply believed in the will of Heaven, and believed it to be within him. In this respect he was religious. Confucian teaching is ultimately religious if we think of religion as the coincidence of the finite and the infinite or the relative and the absolute. The doctrines of many philosophers ultimately advocate such a coincidence and thus are religious. Confucian teaching, too, is religious in this sense, but this religiosity differs from the Confucian religiosity of old. (HATTORI 1938, 163)

For Hattori, Confucian teaching in modern Confucianism should be ethical as well as religious. Hattori's attitude is quite different from Watsuji's. Hattori was dissatisfied with any separation between public morality and private religion. He tried to construct a new type of religion, a civil religion, which would transcend respective religions in the private realm and be amalgamated with morality and ethics in the public realm.

In this regard, it was useful for him to find philosophical religiosity at the extreme limits of Confucian teaching.

In fact, Hattori supported the construction of the Association Concordia (帰一協会) with Anesaki Masaharu, Shibusawa Eiichi, and Inoue Tetsujirō in June 1912. This association was imagined as a “unification of spiritual sectors” including religious groups such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Shinto. The participants were not satisfied with moralism as advocated in the “National Moralism” (国民道德論) of that time, and they wanted to re-appropriate religious dimensions into morality and ethics. They imagined that Confucianism could unite religions, and for this reason, Confucianism should be not only ethical, but also religious. Hattori’s views on Confucianism were in complete accord with the policies of the time.

INOUE TETSUJIRŌ (1856–1944): ETHICAL RELIGION

Inoue Tetsujirō was one of the founders of modern Japanese philosophy. As a professor of philosophy at the University of Tokyo, he set up the departments of (Western) Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, Chinese Philosophy, Religious Studies, and so on. Hattori was one of his colleagues, as was Anesaki who was also his son-in-law.

Inoue advocated that Confucianism was both religious and ethical at the same time. This is because he aimed to construct a new type of religion, an “ethical religion” (徳教／倫理の宗教), which should be based on Confucianism:

We need to make morality the place where our ideals become actualized to make it our religion. We have no need for old religions, but the time has come to construct a morality as a successor. This morality would be much more reasonable than any religion of old. Devoid of superstition, it would be aligned with the sciences of today. That old religions cannot align with science is evidence of their obsolescence. That today’s morality is able to be aligned with the sciences and foster individual autonomy is proof of its value as a replacement for old religions. Morality seen in this way surpasses any religion both in value and progressiveness. (INOUE 2003, 302–3)

Inoue implicitly rejected Buddhism as an old religion, but accepted both Confucianism and Shinto. Confucianism in his view was a moral teaching that retained a religious core:

In sum, Confucianism is coincident with religion insofar as it reveres Heaven as a greatness beyond human beings. It is quite different from religion, however, insofar as it ignores rituals and the afterlife. (309)

To defend the religiosity of Confucianism, Inoue took the bold step of refuting the proposition that “Confucianism is an ethical religion, but not a religion” (337), and indeed took the same attitude toward Shinto. The proposition that “Shinto is not a religion” was an official opinion in prewar Japan. However, Inoue did not deny its religiosity:

If one goes to worship [at a shrine] in a moral sense, you reach a depth of reverence that may be called “faith.” One’s visit is morally fruitless if one does not reach this depth. We may regard it as morality, recognizing that such faith is necessary for morality. (364–5)

As mentioned above, Hattori, Anesaki, and Inoue were not satisfied with “national morality.” They felt that something religious should be added to morality. In other words, they needed an amalgam of morality and religion for the legitimacy of modern Japan. We may define this amalgam as a Japanese “civil religion.” Confucianism was restored in this way as a new source of both morality and religion.

THE POLITICAL MEANING OF “CIVIL RELIGION” IN PREWAR JAPAN

The high point of this restoration of Confucianism in prewar Japan was a Conference on the Confucian Way held in 1935. Hattori and Inoue played important roles as representatives of the *Shibunkai* 斯文会 (the Association for Confucianism).

In Japan in 1935 there was criticism of Minobe Tatsukichi’s theory of the emperor as an organ of government, followed by two “Clarifications of the Japanese National Polity” expressing ultranationalism. In April of that year, Yushima Seidō (湯島聖堂, the Yushima Confucian temple),

which had been destroyed in the great Kanto earthquake, was restored. In commemoration of the restoration, an International Confucian Congress (later renamed the “Conference on the Confucian Way”) was organized.

Before the conference was to be held on 28 April, the Emperor of Manchuria, Pu Yi, visited Yushima Seidō on 13 April. The conference clearly had the political goal of internationally acknowledging Manchuria. Along with this, the political meaning of modern Confucianism as a civil religion promoted by Hattori and Inoue became clear.

Hattori, who was then a secretary of the Japan-Manchuria Cultural Society and a vice-secretary of *Shibunkai*, gave the closing remarks at the conference:

The fever for Eastern studies that was generated during the First World War spread worldwide along with the war. It is unnecessary to say that the essence of Eastern culture is Chinese culture, which has been blended with the characteristic national culture of our country where it was introduced. It also goes without saying that the foundation of Eastern culture is the Confucian Way. The Confucian Way was introduced to our country long ago, fused into the Way of the Gods, cultivating the Japanese spirit, glorifying the achievements of the saints, and contributing to three great deeds: the Taika reforms, the Kemmu restoration, and the Meiji restoration of the monarchy. There may be some who have different ideas about the Confucian Way, but taking into account this history of the Confucian Way in Japan, and with concern for the future of the world, I believe that this gathering of men of letters from many countries and their frank exchange of opinions will help overcome political and economic problems and benefit world peace. (HATTORI 1938, 68)

The Confucian Way, an amalgam of Confucianism with Japanese Shinto, was not only useful for the legitimacy of modern Japan, but also important for world peace in the time of crisis after the First World War. As long as the Confucian Way was constructed by modern Japan, world peace could be realized under the initiative of Japan; it was the protraction of Japanese civil religion in East Asia. If we borrow Robert Bellah’s

phrase, “a world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not as a denial of Japanese ‘civil religion’” (BELLAH 1970).

Compared to Hattori, Inoue’s political implications were much more explicit. Before the conference, a “Conference on Confucian Culture” was held on 20 April 1935 at which Inoue gave a talk entitled “Confucius’ Character and Beliefs.” In this talk, he mentioned that China had celebrated Confucius again on 27 August 1934 and made that day a national holiday. He also surmised that the King’s Way (王道) in Manchuria lay in the background, influencing the Nanjing government. However, as long as China was advocating the Three People’s Principles, the King’s Way of Confucius could never be realized. What, then, could be done? Inoue’s answer was to make Confucius’ descendants monarchs, similar to the Japanese Imperial family, and to establish the King’s Way in the same manner as the Japanese Imperial Way (皇道), which was organized on the basis of the amalgam of Confucianism and Shinto (INOUE 2003, 129, 132).

Nevertheless, as long as the Imperial Way remained superior to the King’s Way, and even if China abandoned the Three People’s Principles, China and Japan would not be in an equal relationship. Inoue’s protraction of a Japanese civil religion was inevitably asymmetric, a political machination aimed at putting Manchuria and China in an inferior position since they had only the King’s Way of Confucius.

CONCLUSION

We are now facing the new phenomenon of the restoration of Confucianism in contemporary China. Needless to say, it is not directly related to the restoration of Confucianism in prewar Japan. Nevertheless, this is not an isolated phenomenon and is deeply related to modernity in East Asia. In this regard, we can learn more from the Japanese experience of modernized or modernizing Confucianism, especially when discourse on civil religion in China appears today, as Japanese civil religion, being an amalgam of Confucianism and Shinto, could become a mirror of reflection.

We have thus come to the right moment to rethink Confucianism in

a completely different light. It would be difficult to make Confucianism a religion in the modern Western sense, as Hattori and Inoue did, or to secularize it as a “morality.” We need to take a third way, but not in order to amalgamate morality and religion; it is necessary to avoid using Confucianism as a civil religion, the path that Hattori and Inoue took. On the contrary, a revitalized Confucianism would never be used for political aims. Instead, it would criticize the politicization of Confucianism, and recover its critical potential. We might rename this revitalized Confucianism “critical Confucianism.” With roots in the modern experiences of Confucianism in China and Japan, critical Confucianism would critique and open up a new space for discussion on morality and religion. It is therefore important to rethink prewar Japanese discourse on Confucianism and at the same time observe the current restoration of Confucianism in China.

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