

18 Chen Duxiu: *On the Question of a Confucian State Religion* (1917)

Introduced and translated by Yee Lak Elliot Lee

Introduction

Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) was an intellectual, political activist, and educator, best known as a professor at Peking University, and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party alongside Li Dazhao in 1921. Chen received a traditional Confucian education, and passed the county-level imperial exam in 1896. Subsequently, he pursued a Westernised higher education at Qiushi Academy in Hangzhou, and then later in Tokyo. During his time in Japan, Chen was exposed to socialism, and became deeply involved in Chinese revolutionary movements. In 1915, he established the periodical *Qingnian* 青年 (*Youth*) in Shanghai, which was renamed *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (*La Jeunesse/New Youth*) in 1916. Published in vernacular Chinese – as opposed to classical literary Chinese – *Xin Qingnian* gained widespread circulation among the ‘progressive’ intelligentsia, and became a vital platform within the New Cultural Movement.

Chen’s article in *Xin Qingnian*, translated below, responds to the ongoing debate about whether Confucianism should be considered and treated as a religion – a topic discussed since late Qing reformism.¹ The idea of establishing a national Confucian church had resurfaced when Kang Youwei (1858–1927) proposed it to the republican Beiyang government in 1913. This concept was further fuelled by the powerful Beiyang warlords’ appropriation of Confucian state rituals and symbols, such as promoting Confucianism in public schools, sponsoring spring and autumn sacrificial rites at local Confucius temples, and attempts at enshrining Confucianism as the national religion in the Republican constitution. In his article, Chen challenges this ‘religionisation’ of Confucianism on three main grounds: 1) his belief in science as opposed to religion, 2) his assertion of the non-religious character of Confucianism, and 3) his advocacy for the secular nature of the state and constitution.

Chen’s article commences with his support for science as a driving force of progress grounded in the laws of nature. His scientism positions itself in opposition to religions, which he views as artificial and historically specific beliefs that divert people from reality. He then argues that the concept of a Confucian religion, or *Kongjiao*, is inherently contradictory. His argument draws from the traditional Confucian literati

¹ Compare Kang Youwei’s memorial translated above.

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understanding that their tradition primarily concerns ethics and social order in this world, while disregarding the supernatural.^{II} Thus, according to Chen, Confucianism is not a religion, and should not be treated as one.

Subsequently, Chen challenges advocates of a Confucian religion, on the grounds of constitutional neutrality. He asserts that incorporating religious ethics would undermine the constitution's public nature and equal application to the entire nation, particularly regarding the treatment of various religions in China. Chen not only insists on the separation of religion from the legal realm, but also advocates for the separation of the legal realm from the domain of education. Even though state support for Confucianism does not necessarily restrict the freedom of other beliefs, he argues, it would contradict the state's equal treatment of all religions.

Chen's article presents a critical approach to the political question of religion's role in China's modernisation efforts. It illustrates the new intelligentsia's attempt to break away from the country's political and cultural tradition by embracing Western legal concepts and principles, to re-evaluate the political framework of the modern Chinese state. In Chen's formulation, political secularism served as a constitutional principle to safeguard religious equality before the state and, simultaneously, as a means to emphasise the difference between religion and science, and advance his belief that China's modernisation must be based on science.

Bibliographical Information

Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀. "Zai lun Kongjiao wenti 在論孔教問題" [Revisiting the Question of a Confucian Religion]. *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (*La Jeunesse/New Youth*) 2, no. 5 (01.01.1917): 1–4.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

Translation by Yee Lak Elliot Lee

The stagnation in our compatriots' intellectual thoughts is mainly due to the sweep- ingness of claims, and the lack of clarity in argumentation. Recently, the question of a Confucian religion has remained dizzying and undecided – a result of the above. Hence, before I declare my stance [on the question of a Confucian religion], I dare to clarify it with prudence for the readers.

Firstly, I believe that humanity's future awareness and proof of the truth will defi- nitely follow science as the rectified path, and all religions will be discarded. The reasons behind this are complex, yet I will briefly discuss them. There are two kinds of law in the universe: one is the law of nature, and the other is human-made law. The law of nature

II For examples of this attitude, see the texts by Li Fu and Peng Guangyu translated in this volume.

is universal, eternal, and inevitable. Science belongs to it. Human-made law is particular, time-specific, and normative. Religion, morality, and [state] law belong to it. Without eating, one starves, and ageing leads to death. These are eternal inevitabilities for organisms, definitely not partial, time-specific, or normatively prescribed. Yet, the worship of Jehovah, a subject sacrificing his life for his sovereign or a wife for her husband, or the punishment for early marriage, are all human-made laws. They only apply to a specific territory at a particular time, and are certainly not universal, eternal, or inevitable.

The future evolution of humanity should follow the recently emerging science, [which is] becoming more developed each day, and rectify all the human-made laws to make them as effective as the laws of nature, so that the universe and human lives would really be in harmony. Is this not the grandest and the ultimate goal of us humans? Some people say the mystery of the universe and human lives is not something science can explain, and that the resolution of doubts [concerning these mysteries] and consolation of distress can only be reached through religion.

I instead think that the way ahead for scientific progress is long. We humans cannot, based on the contemporary self-boundaries of science, say that it will not resolve doubts eventually. Conversely, as to the opinion that religion can liberate human beings, I believe that (religious) people must first deceive themselves [about reality], and only then can they liberate themselves, but this is not real liberation. Only science can really resolve doubts. Therefore, I propose substituting science for religion, to open up a belief in the truth for us humans – though slowly, we will ultimately arrive. If one seeks liberation via superstition and religion, it would be a case of “haste brings no success in arriving!”

Secondly, let's talk about the “Confucian religion” (*Kongjiao* 孔教).^I Alas, the two words, Confucius (*Kong*) and religion (*jiao*), do not form a proper noun. Among all the old Chinese theories, only the theory of the School of Yin-Yang belongs to religion (*zongjiao* 宗教). Mohism is explicit about ghosts, and is thus also close [to religion]. The *ru* 儒 (literati specialised in rituals)^{II} won over the people through the *Dao* (Way), and had the six arts [i.e. rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics] as their teaching (*jiao* 教). Confucius was a *ru*.

Confucius was the most important of the *ru*, both until that point and since. His teachings were about “culture, moral conduct, doing one's best, [p. 1/2] and being trustworthy in what one says,”^{III} but he did not discuss life and death, nor talk about ghosts

I YLEL: Where there is ambiguity, we have included the *pinyin* of the Chinese concepts used by Chen Duxiu in this article. The concept of *jiao* is particularly ambiguous, as it refers both to the classical meaning as “teaching” and as an abbreviation of the neologism “*zongjiao*” 宗教 – a term coined in Japan using a traditional Chinese Buddhist terminology, which had become a standardised translation of “religion” by the 1910s.

II YLEL: In Western publications, *ru* is often rendered as “Confucian” or “Confucianist.”

III YLEL: Here “*wen xing zhong xin*” 文行忠信 is a direct quote from chapter “*Shuer*” 述而 of *Lunyu* 論語 (*The Analects of Confucius*) 7:25. The translation here refers to D.C. Lau, trans., *The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012), 62–63.

and gods. When he lectured about the conduct of the *ru* (literati)^{IV} in front of the ruler of Lu, it was all about establishing oneself and restricting one's actions, but there was not a single teaching that was close to what today is called religion. The proper noun "Confucian teaching" (*Kongjiao*) originated from the confrontations between the Three Teachings^V during the Northern and Southern dynasties [420–589 CE]. In fact, neither Laozi of the Daoist school nor Confucius of the school of the literati were religious leaders. The essence of their theories is by no means the teachings of a religious school. Since the proper noun "Confucian religion" (*Kongjiao*) does not make sense, are those who insist on making Confucianism a state religion not presumptuous and ignorant?

There is a story about two myopic people who argued about the correctness of the calligraphy on a plaque and even got into a fight. Someone with clear sight standing beside them laughed because there was no plaque at all. Those who advocate "Confucian religion" today are no different [from the myopic people].

Even if we follow the social habit of recognising either "Confucian religion" (*Kongjiao*) or "religion of the literati" (*Rujiao*)^{VI} as a proper noun, it still should not be linked to politics, or be added to the constitution. The separation of politics and religion is already a public rule. The constitution is of a legal nature, and the whole country indiscriminately follows it, [hence] it must not involve religion and morality, which would give people room for deviation and violation. This is what Mr Cai Jiemin^{VII} meant by "Confucius is Confucius, religion is religion, the state is the state. Their meanings and principles are different, and should not be forcefully mixed up." Mr Cai is definitely not against Confucius, let alone against religion; in this regard, I do not agree with him. However, I share his view that Confucius, religion, and the state are of three fundamentally different natures, have clear boundaries, and cannot be forcefully joined.

If Confucianism is established as the state religion and added to the constitution, and if this should then have practical consequences, what about the equal rights of the adherents of Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, or Islam? Conversely, if it should

IV YLEL: *Ruxing* 儒行 "conduct of the *ru*" is also a chapter title in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) that allegedly recorded the audience of Confucius with the Duke Ai of Lu 魯哀公 (r. 494–468 BCE).

V YLEL: The Three Teachings in China are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. This is an emic differentiation of doctrinal traditions, before the emergence of the concept of 'world religions'; it is also comparable to the notion of the "People of the Book" in Islamic societies, see Gudrun Krämer, "Religion, Culture, and the Secular: The Case of Islam." Working Paper Series of the CASHSS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities' 23 (Leipzig: KFG 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities, 2021). Also, see note 6 below on the emic terms for Confucianism.

VI YLEL: *Kongjiao* literally means the teaching/religion of Confucius, and *rujiao* the teaching/religion of the Confucian literati.

VII YLEL: Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940), aka Cai Jiemin 蔡子民 was an influential intellectual and an acquaintance of Chen Duxiu, who, at the time of Chen Duxiu's writing his article, was rector of Peking University, and later became the first president of Academia Sinica.

not have practical consequences, will the national law not then be a joke? The intermingling of politics and religion will open up endless disputes in the country. If the way of Confucius was a grand source of self-cultivation, and was written into the constitution, then why aren't the ways of those preceding Confucius, like Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, and Zhou Gong,^{VIII} and those of figures after Confucius, like Yang,^{IX} Mo,^X Meng,^{XI} Xun,^{XII} Cheng, Zhu, Lu, and Wang,^{XIII} included as grand sources of self-cultivation? How could this be determined by one single claimant? Moreover, can't such disputes lead to a cataclysm caused by conflicting teachings?

Some would say a state religion is indeed impossible, and Confucius was also not a religious thinker, but the Confucian way of self-cultivation has nevertheless been the source of our country's moral education. It has been linked to people's morality for thousands of years. Once abolished, they claim, it would become a severe problem for the customs and morale of the people; thus, it has to be written into the constitution as the general principle of education. Concerning this position, there are three open questions I would like to address:

- (1) Is the Confucian ethical theory of self-cultivation compatible with a Republican constitution? Are Confucian teachings about rituals applicable to contemporary citizens' daily lives? [p. 2/3]
- (2) Is it permissible for the constitution to address questions of education and morality?
- (3) Does the constitution of any other nation contain the names of individuals?

If these three questions cannot be answered, it would be even more absurd to add the doctrine of self-cultivation of Confucius to the constitution than it would be to make Confucianism the state religion! Although [having] a state religion is not a sound system, there are at least still precedents for it.

As to [the opinion] that education should take someone's theory as the foundation of self-cultivation and that this should be stipulated in a constitutional article, this can be regarded as an internationally unprecedented big joke. Since many members of the National Assembly actually maintain such an ignorant view, it is not surprising that voices calling for a dissolution of the National Assembly are heard everywhere.

VIII YLEL: These were the ancient sages (kings) according to the Confucians.

IX YLEL: Yang Zhu (440–c.360 BCE) was a post-Confucian philosopher, who promoted a form of ethical egoism.

X YLEL: Mozi (c.470–c.391 BCE) was the founder of Mohism.

XI YLEL: Mengzi or Mencius (372–289 BCE) is usually referred to as the 'second sage' of Confucianism, after Confucius.

XII YLEL: Xunzi (c.310–c.238 BCE) a post-Confucius Confucian philosopher, who systematically revised Confucian philosophy, laying the foundation for the development of the Legalist philosophy, which provided the political philosophy adopted by the Qin empire.

XIII YLEL: The Cheng brothers – Cheng Hao (1032–1085 CE) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107), Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Lu Jiuyuan (1139–1192), and Wang Yangming (1472–1529) – were all important figures of neo-Confucianism.

Our generation's belief in science, which is the right track that will definitely lead humankind to enlightenment and the enjoyment of happiness, is what our nation urgently needs. In promoting and respecting it, science should be placed above the Confucian teaching (*Kongjiao*), the [self-cultivating] way of Confucius (*Kongdao*), or any other religion or philosophy. While promoting and respecting them is permissible, stipulating them in the constitution to force people to promote and respect them is hugely impermissible. A constitution is purely within the category of law. It cannot involve questions of education, just as it cannot involve questions of industry – which does not mean that education and industry are unimportant. The law cannot stipulate respect for the way of Confucius, just as it cannot stipulate respect for any form of science, which does not mean that the way of Confucius and science are unimportant. Whether the way of Confucius cannot be the grand source of the self-cultivation of the Republic's citizens is a different question. The constitution cannot prescribe anyone's theory as the grand source of self-cultivation, and need not choose between Confucius and Rousseau. It is not just the anti-civil rights, anti-republic stance of the way of Confucius that cannot be written into the constitution as the grand source of self-cultivation. Even the schools that promote civil rights and republicanism cannot be written into the constitution as the grand source of self-cultivation. As the law, on the one hand, and religion and education, on the other, have their field of meaning, they should not be confused.

Today, those who are against [the establishment of] a state religion, without exception, arm themselves with the article on religious freedom in the Provisional Constitution. And recently, some people in the capital have established the Association for Freedom of Religious Belief^{XIV} to stir public opinion. I firmly believe that these people's actions are reasonable, but somewhat incomplete, when regarding the reality [on the ground]. Why do I say so?

Chinese Confucian temples are spread across all prefectures and counties. Government offices and schools have long participated in the Spring and Autumn Rites. This is just like a state religion. For those who believe in other religions, the government has never attempted to oppress or banish them. Even if Confucianism was set as the state religion and instated in the constitution, I predict that other [religious] practices would continue in parallel, and would be unlikely to be completely suppressed. Thus, I think what religious adherents of each religion should demand from the government is not the people's right to freedom of religious belief, [p. 3/4] but the right to equal treatment by the state. The state taxes all citizens, not merely the followers of Confucianism. To support the establishment of temples for the worship of Confucius with state expenses means one must also use state expenses to build temples and monasteries for Buddhist and Daoist worship, and churches and mosques for Christian and Muslim worship. The

XIV YLEL: The Association for Freedom in Religious Belief (Xinjiao Ziyou Hui 信教自由會) was established in November 1916 in Beijing, primarily by Chinese Protestants and Catholics.

alternative is that no place of worship will be built, and no sacrifice will be made [using state expenses]. Hence, the state's treatment of every religion will not commit the outrageous crime of partiality. Believers of each religion are taxed equally, so they should enjoy the same rights. Only by doing this can we avoid religious cataclysms brewing in our country. From this standpoint, not only can Confucianism not be the state religion or be incorporated into the future constitution, but it is also imperative that the existing [state-supported] Confucius temples across the country be destroyed, and their offerings abandoned!