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Politics, Humanities, and Rural Homeland: The Prospects of Contemporary Confucianism

<https://doi.org/10.1515/icos-2022-2006>

Abstract: When observing the historical interaction between Confucianism and society, we see the origin of Confucian “learning” that began to take root during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. After Confucianism became the guiding political ideology during the Western Han Dynasty, a new social structure gradually came into being, featuring a close relationship between politics, humanities, rural homeland, and Confucian scholars playing their roles as scholar, official, and landed gentry. This was a rare phenomenon in the history of world civilization. It ensured the political power being handed down peacefully from generation to generation. It also guaranteed equal access to political opportunities, and the establishment of an orderly relationship between politics and culture, as well as between morality and social governance. However, after a century of twists and turns, Confucian scholars and Confucianism lost its way forward and its roots. Fortunately, the last four decades has seen a revival of Confucianism in China. Nonetheless, it still finds itself confronted by many modern-day challenges.

Keywords: contemporary Confucianism, politics, humanities, rural homeland

In this paper, I would like to examine the prospect of contemporary Confucianism from a historical perspective, based on interaction between Confucianism and society. This exploration does not confine itself to thoughts or systems only but covers the long-term relations between Confucian scholars and social politics. Only a few individuals are able to transcend their social conditions and create a

Article note: This article was first published in Chinese in Issue 1, Volume 1 of *International Studies on Confucianism* (《国际儒学》). Some updates and adaptation have been made for the English version, which was translated by Ping Peng.

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new paradigm. Generally, the course of an individual's life and his future prospects are usually determined by the social and cultural circumstances in which he lives in. Faced with today's globalization and technological challenges, Confucianism may not therefore hold as much promise as hoped because it cannot regain its former historical status. On the other hand, Confucianism could have a bright future thanks to some of its unique characteristics, its rich ideological resources and its long-standing ability to be passed down from generation to generation.

1 The Position

In the 2000 or more years that followed the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–25 C.E.), Confucianism dominated socio-political life and the slogan “Respect Only Confucianism” was advanced. The upper class—the ruling elite in particular—was almost exclusively composed of Confucian scholars who played three different types of role in their life. First, they were scholars, then officials appointed through recommendation and assessment, or by passing the imperial examination, and thirdly landed gentry after their retirement and going back to their rural homeland with fame and prestige. They were responsible for the settlement of local disputes; for civic projects like the construction of bridges and roads, as well as doing public good for local residents such as disaster relief. Quite often, the three roles were interchangeable. Essentially they were scholar-officials serving the imperial court, though sometimes they would stay in hometown in order to mourn the death of a parent, or waiting for a new appointment.

Generally speaking, one had to have the qualification of a scholar to be able to play the roles in the abovementioned three areas. Only those committed students would become first class scholars who were then selected and appointed to be officials, and only those who were erudite could enjoy prestige and respect in official circles. Those who had passed the imperial examination at the county level but had no ambition nor opportunity to climb higher, could still obtain a certain rank or title and be granted some legitimate benefits. They were part of “a scholar-official community” and revered as “learned men”. Thus they could also gain some financial advantages, for instance, they were qualified to teach in private schools. Once they passed the imperial examination at a provincial level, they would attain higher status in the community and could enter officialdom. Those who did not want to become officials would be appointed head of an academic institution, or

given a post close to power, such as an editor of official documents or counselor to a high-ranking officer. Those who passed the highest imperial examination would be granted an even more superior title and enjoy more financial resources and power.

Among these three roles, namely: that of a scholar, official or a member of the landed gentry, the most important was that of an official, a person in power. Only those Confucian scholars who held positions of power could realize their political ambitions, be it through policy-making—where millions of people might be influenced, or through their decisions related to state security and social benefits. Only by the exercise of power could they obtain wealth, status and prestige, moreover they would not just be considered “gentlemen”, but members of the “intelligentsia”. However, in order to be appointed to an official position and enter the political arena, most of them had to pass the imperial examination at different levels which would test their intellect.

As members of the landed gentry, they were the mainstay of rural society in terms of maintenance of local stability and giving guidance for the local people, and within their communities they held positions of authority. They might help settle disputes and resolve problems faced by residents of the community, and make contribution to cultural and educational development of localities. Some might even undertake pioneering work towards ethical improvement. During ancient times, demoted officials were often exiled to remote places where they brought with them advanced culture to those backward areas. Some retired officials acted as a conduit between local governments and the people, and helped solve many local problems, therefore they were held in high esteem by local officials. Together, they wine and dine or gathered to compose poems. Because of their considerable wealth, land and property, they were held in awe by local people. They had left their homes when young to serve as officials for the imperial court and returned home after their retirement, they loved—or had strong attachments to—their homeland. Everything in hometown were familiar and dear to them. Most had originally come from farming families, some of them even came from poverty-stricken households, so they knew well about the sufferings and hardships of local residents. Now with wealth and influence, they were willing to do something good for their hometowns. Due to their efforts, a lot of administrative work at the grassroots level was carried out effectively, lessening much burden of local government bodies. While they had their roots in their rural communities, they did not all become “rich despots”. As they had seen the outside world and, more importantly, had been influenced by Confucian teachings on morality, and were well read and nurtured by great writings, their desire for material wealth was much mitigated.

2 Trilateral Relationships

Phenomena of trilateral relationship between politics, humanities, rural homeland, and officials playing the roles of scholar, official, and landed gentry, were rare in the history of humanity, especially those officials' academic achievement enabled them to make colossal contribution to society. The main significance was abolition of the aristocratic hereditary system and peaceful handover of power from generation to generation. Such practice ensured scholars' equal access to political opportunities, their rise in officialdom, and contribution to social stability, all of which helped to enhance and improve social governance.

Ancient Greece was a city-state society. Athens at that time was a city-state, where its citizens had equal political rights and took turns to rule by drawing lots. Its people enjoyed full democracy and flourishing culture. Unfortunately, such democracy did not last long. At that time, philosophers, poets, and playwrights were commoners who received no special privileges. In Sparta, warriors belonged to a special class while scholarly knowledge was not respected whatsoever.

Rome, during the whole period from a republic to an empire, championed militarism and ignored literature and arts. In medieval kingdoms, hereditary monarchs and wealthy aristocrats who owned private armies played dominant roles in politics. However, the emerging Catholic Church—a force that could practically contend with the monarchy—attracted some cultural young hopefuls from the lower classes, and talented Catholics from poor families who had the opportunity to rise to the top. To restrain a pernicious system of inherited administrative power, the Mamluk Sultanate, which governed Egypt until the Ottoman Empire, forcefully recruited—and even abducted—children from numerous European regions and brought them to its capital, where the children received good education and training so that they could become “Slave Generals” or “Slave Prime Ministers” with political and military power. However, their power was not allowed to be passed down to their heirs.

Such systems were not entirely ineffective but, compared with China's imperial examination system, they seemed simplistic and crude. Though they worked to stymie the hereditary system, issues such as unequal access to political opportunities, the integration between politics and culture were ignored.

In a way, the ancient Chinese scholars who believed in the concept of “He who excels in studies can become an official” can be compared with literati in the modern-day West, especially those living around the era of the Enlightenment. For instance, in 18th century France the literati—mostly enlightened philosophers

who lived in a totalitarian society—enjoyed a relatively superior social status. The best examples are Voltaire and Rousseau, who were the most prestigious and influential thinkers of the time.

The young Voltaire was twice thrown into the Bastille (where of course, he could read and study); but his influence grew rapidly, later he earned enough to have bought apartments and villas on the scenic border of Switzerland, from where he wrote works that continued to be read all over Europe. To a large extent, these works dominated public opinion; even France's King Louis XV did not know what to do about Voltaire. According to the biography *Voltaire* translated by Fu Lei (傅雷 1908–1966), the writer once said that “I have a dozen kings in my hand,” (Maurois, 2017, p. 117) indicating that he enjoyed the support of the monarchs of Prussia, Denmark, Poland, and Russia. He actually became a protégé of a large number of feudal aristocrats who loved literature and art. In addition, he was very popular among the people because he had striven to redress an injustice which had been levied against Jean Calas and others. Rousseau, penniless and homeless, worse still, having offended quite a few friends of his, was a favorite of some aristocrats and kings who admired his philosophy and intelligence, so he too had a comfortable dwelling on the border. In his later years, he returned to Paris to live out his days.

These men of letters did not want to enter politics, yet through their writings they had great impact on social development, which naturally had its political repercussions. A careful and detailed analysis of the Enlightenment is still needed in order to thoroughly evaluate its social and political significance.

However, the longstanding tripartite relationships between politics, humanities, and rural homeland throughout Chinese history created a resilient framework producing a “selection-based society” with the countryside as its foundation. This was because most of those selected through imperial examinations came from rural China, and it was the rural homeland that most retired officials preferred for their final years. It was their sweet home, their roots. It was where they had started and it was also where they wanted to enjoy their final days. Officials who retired and returned to their native hometown supported studious local youths, especially their own posterity. Thus, a new cycle could be started afresh. As an agrarian society in ancient days, China had its foundation in the countryside.

Politics was essential; it provided assurance. Only with the support of those in power and institutional guarantee, ancient scholars could have access to stable supply of various resources. Power was a good leverage for them to realize their political aspiration.

However, the study of the humanities with morality at its core was also essential for scholar-officials. It was the basis, the threshold, a mandatory qualification. For scholar-officials, their most basic and fundamental identity came from their intellect. If they were not well versed, they would have no position in society. Similarly, Confucianism is a study of morality. During the Western Han Dynasty, after having initially been proposed by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒 179 B.C.E.–104 B.C.E.), the slogan “Respecting Only Confucianism” was adopted by the imperial court, and Confucianism became the sole topic of imperial examinations for selection and appointment of officials. It became the guiding principle of the ruling class and the dominant ideology in society. The emphasis on humanities led to the flourishing of art and culture in China, and therefore produced a society where learning was respected. The tripartite role of Chinese scholar-officials reflected their position in politics, economics and culture, manifested China’s key socio-political characteristics, and cultural advancement.

A Confucian scholar had to properly handle his relations with his peers, monarchy, and the people in general. In a perspective of past 2000 years, whom did they fare best?

Confucian scholars excelled in “self-cultivation”. First, they regarded Confucianism as a study of self-improvement, from which they drew courage and learned to be self-restraint. Such study was a process of self-reflection and learning, and brought together a group, a system, and an all-encompassing mood. In this process, they discussed ethics, their understanding of Confucian teachings, and self-cultivation, and, at the same time, being nourished from literature and arts.

Secondly, it is an education of the people. It can be said with certainty that the system of assessment and imperial examinations greatly promoted the development of social culture and ethics, encouraged people to learn to read and write. In some regions, and during prosperous reigns, learning was popular and respected by society. Noticeable cultural improvement was made in certain far-flung border regions. However, literacy levels and public hygiene in these areas were not all enhanced. It was particularly the case during periods of economic crises or wars, when survival came first.

Thirdly, it exerted influence on power. As a doctrine for governance, Confucianism served as a restraining force on the ruler. Emperors were brought up in an environment where Confucian doctrines dominated the Chinese culture. However, the power of officials was, after all, subject to that of the ruler, so there was hardly a balance of power. The supremacy of emperors became more apparent after the Yuan (1206–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties.

3 The Formative Process

In Part I, I have mentioned the societal integration of politics, humanities, and rural homeland that happened after the Western Han Dynasty. What is worth noting is that historic revolution took place twice, one at the beginning of such integration and the other at the end of it, each being followed by a period of transition. The two transitional periods were the Warring States Period (475 B.C.E.–221 B.C.E.) and the 20th century; the Spring and Autumn (770 B.C.E.–476 B.C.E.) was the formation period. By looking back on that period and the Warring States Period, we may better understand the position and mission of Confucianism today.

In terms of viability, the Warring States Period could almost be called “the era of the roving scholars”. They might not serve a particular official for a long time, and from time to time they themselves might be appointed as officials. They did not settle in a place for long. Most of them were either at the lowest social ladder of nobility or ordinary people, with little wealth or land. Despite all this, they still had chances to climb up, or might become a high official. On the whole, they were short of wealth and had no inheritance of wealth. Very often, they had neither fixed official title, nor political power.

In the late Spring and Autumn Period, the School of Confucianism came into being. The foundation of its establishment was learning. Without learning, there would be no Confucianism. Confucius aspired to enter scholarship at the age of 15; enrolled his own students at 30. At 50, he travelled widely and had been to many states. He settled down and concentrated on studying and teaching in his later years. All state rulers in the Warring States Period were keen to hire erudite people, particularly those with the ability to make the state strong and wealthy.

According to the chapter “Biographies of Mencius and Xun Kuang” in *Records of the Grand Historian* (《史记·孟子荀卿列传》), Mencius, who was a disciple of Zi Si (子思 483 B.C.E.–402 B.C.E.), offered his advice to King Xuan of the Qi State (齐宣王 ca. 350 B.C.E.–ca. 301 B.C.E.), but was rejected. Mencius then went to the Liang State, where King Hui (梁惠王 400 B.C.E.–319 B.C.E.) did not take his advice either, saying he was a pedantic man with too high an ambition. At that time, Shang Yang (商鞅 ca. 390 B.C.E.–338 B.C.E.) helped the Qin State become wealthy and strong; Wu Qi (吴起 ?–381 B.C.E.) helped Chu and Wei to defeat their enemies, and Sun Zi (孙子 ca. 545 B.C.E.–470 B.C.E.) and Tian Ji (田忌 dates unknown) helped King Wei (齐威王 378 B.C.E.–320 B.C.E.) and King Xuan of Qi to become the strongest state in the east. All the states were busy forming alliances with each other, taking those who were militarily skilled as

counselors. However, Mencius was simply extolling the virtues advocated by previous dynasties, hence he failed to move with the times. With his disciple Wan Zhang (万章 dates unknown), he retreated to write the prefaces for *The Book of Poetry* (《诗》) and *The Book of History* (《书》), conveying Confucian teachings and writing seven chapters of the book *Mencius* (《孟子》七篇) (Sima, 1982b, p. 2343).

In comparison with the Legalists (法家), Military Strategists (兵家), and Political Strategists (纵横家), who were all highly regarded, Confucian scholars were ignored. They could not even be compared with the School of Yin-Yang (阴阳家). Its founder Zou Yan (邹衍 ca. 324 B.C.E.–ca. 250 B.C.E.) was thus described: “Despite his ridiculous ideas, he was regarded highly in Qi, and was welcomed in the suburbs by King Hui of Liang with rituals typically used to honor a distinguished guest. When he arrived in the Zhao State, Lord Pingyuan (平原君 ?–251 B.C.E.) walked by his side and personally cleaned his seat for him. In the Yan State, King Zhao swept the road for him.” “He was respected so much that neither Confucius nor Mencius could match him, for the former starved in Chen and Cai states while the latter was stranded in Qi and Liang.” (Sima, 1982b, p. 2345)

People who had been seeking fame and fortune out of Confucianism left and turned to the political philosophy of Legalism. Han Fei (韩非 280 B.C.E.–233 B.C.E.), together with Li Si (李斯 ?–208 B.C.E.), studied with Xun Kuang (荀况 313 B.C.E.–238 B.C.E.) (Sima, 1982a, p. 2146), he later established the Legalist doctrine. The Qin State owed its strength to Shang Yang and Li Si, the former had made the state prosper, and the latter helped the First Emperor (秦始皇 259 B.C.E.–210 B.C.E.) with national unification. Unfortunately, these two men both met with tragic ends. During the Warring States Period, especially when conflicts were ongoing, Confucian teachings remained dormant.

Confucianism had never advocated violence. We can imagine the social chaos that confronted the righteous Confucians and how they must have felt. Righteousness, harmony and benevolence were the main ideals of Confucianism. While it was not possible for these virtues to resolve contemporary social problems, they were able to help maintain permanent stability. In the Warring States Period, the hereditary aristocracy was overthrown and, in the Qin Dynasty, a system of centralized prefectures and counties was set up, in addition to a system of administration. The doctrines of the Yellow Emperor (黄帝 legendary king in ancient China) and Lao Zi (老子 dates unknown) were employed to revive society in the early Western Han Dynasty, however, the guiding ideology that was eventually adopted was Confucianism. In the 2000 or more years that followed, China’s socio-political system took more from the Han than the Qin. During the Han Dynasty, Confucius was held in high esteem and Confucianism was adopted and further

developed, resulting in a systemic change of official selection and appointment from a process of recommendation and assessment to imperial examinations. It was an extended version of a system used by King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty.

4 Confucianism in the Contemporary Era

After nearly a century of twists and turns in modern times, the social landscape that had been based on a system that Confucian scholars played the three roles in politics, humanities, and rural homeland had entirely disappeared.

There were historical circumstances that obliged Confucian scholars to take on three roles. Politically, there was the monarchy and officialdom; culturally, society was humanities-based, oriented toward morality and benevolent governance; while economically, the society lived off the land. Since the end of feudal rule in China, Confucianism's political influence has been weakening. Through economic and technological changes, China's agricultural society has now transformed into an industrial one. Even so, with 2000 or more years of traditions, Confucianism's dynamism can still be seen for it is deeply rooted in society.

In the lifestyle of and values held by modern-day Chinese people, we can still see traces and influences of the system adopted in the Zhou and Han dynasties. Even though we may not be aware of it, its influence does exist. For instance, value is placed on education and the close relations between families. Meanwhile Chinese society has also been influenced by the enlightenment and revolution over the past century, plus a decade-long period of globalization and market transformation. The latter has been more influential on society than Confucianism.

Of course, Confucianism did not peter out with the abolition of the imperial examination system and the imperial court. If Confucianism and the Confucian School were to depend on politics to survive, they would have long since perished. However, Confucianism is not this sort of ideology; it had existed before it was put into political practice; it survived dynastic declines and historical political splits. As a doctrine, it remained just as it had been, and even has advanced through the challenges it faced.

After more than 100 years or so of being suppressed, Confucianism has seen dramatic development in the last four decades, during which there were neither wars, nor political movements. Besides the academic achievements it has made, it has attracted more and more followers. While drawing on other civilizations, the academia has developed multi-dimensional and creative interpretations of Confucianism. Indeed, Confucianism has begun to revive, or in other words, it is beginning to recover all its fine tenets. Today, the government is paying more

attention to Confucianism, which in turn has attracted new scholars to study it by applying modern knowledge and innovative methodology. Moreover, there are people who are both scholars and faithful practitioners of Confucianism. These two groups of people are not mutually exclusive. There have also appeared people who have re-concentrated on the study of original doctrines of Confucianism and teaching methods, including those at the grassroots level.

5 New Challenges

As mentioned above, because of its attributes, Confucianism was used as an overriding guiding ideology by the rulers of the Western Han Dynasty, though previously it was Legalism that the Qin rulers had exploited to conquer other states and unify the whole country. However, the Western Han chose Confucianism and all successive dynasties followed suit over the next 2000 years. The so-called “Confucianism in appearance, Legalism in essence” was not true. Confucian ideas permeated all corners of social life and were accepted by common folk. This suggests that it was not only a doctrine that encouraged individuals to be kind, but also an ideology that helped maintain social stability. A few decades ago, tradition was greatly disrupted and Confucianism severely criticized, especially in political movements such as “Criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius” and “Lauding Legalism and Criticizing Confucianism” during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Yet, in the past four decades, Confucianism has thrived, which indicates its dynamism.

Confucianism is unlikely to become a dominant philosophy today but it has its place in society. Though politically conservative in nature, it could serve as a stabilizer in society and maintain status quo both socially and politically. This is because it is what the society needs and values, and it is essential for survival of humanity.

Contemporary Confucianism helps maintain a balance between life and personality. It generates interests for the people, and does not profit from the people. It advocates that people should have a decent life, opposes unbridled materialism, and stands for thrift. Confucianism of today values good relations between people and individuals’ aspirations, encouraging people’s self-cultivation and self-improvement. Such pursuits, if realized, enable people to have a good standing in society and to make contribution to the development of social ethics. It does not advocate blindly seeking “progress”, especially if “progress” is one-sided or unbalanced. Confucianism regards balance as being more important than equality. It places importance on human nature and is not morally exigent, nor does it

advocate utopian ideals. In essence, Confucian world outlook embraces things being mutually reinforcing and operating in circle.

Confucianism is sometimes ridiculed as “common sense of morality”. I would like to defend it in this regard. It is a form of common sense that tells us how to live our lives, and how to uphold our morality. It has even become part of the common social narrative. New and eerie theories keep emerging in the West, some offer no common sense whatsoever and others simply distort common sense. In this regard, the common sense that has been preserved for centuries is particularly precious.

Confucianism sets store on common sense. We can take *Commentaries and Annotations on the Four Books* (《四书章句集注》) by Zhu Xi as an example. It was the guide and text for the imperial examination for hundreds of years. In *Commentaries on The Great Learning* (《大学章句》), Zhu pointed out that Confucianism had become a belief because “it requires nothing but to learn the principles of daily life and ethical codes,” (Zhu, 1983, p. 1) and in *Commentaries on The Doctrine of the Mean* (《中庸章句》), he pointed out, “The master of the whole body must be the doctrine and the heart” and “The doctrine is not unfathomable.” (Zhu, 1983, p. 14) Zhu Xi quoted what Confucius had said, “Even if strange or deceitful actions were to be laid down in history books, I would never follow suit,” (Zhu, 1983, p. 21) as well as the quote, “The path is not far.” (Zhu, 1983, p. 17) He gave his interpretations as follows: “The doctrine is like a path. Human beings, like everything else, will find their path through daily life in line with their innate characters. To follow the doctrine means to follow nature, so Confucianism is something that everyone knows and can follow inherently, thus it is not far from our grasp. Those who despise it and need something more superior and elusive can never succeed” (Zhu, 1983, p. 23). Confucianism is not something lofty and untouchable, but inherently simple, in pursuit of harmony. Confucian scholars should stick to Confucian teachings and find out the essence behind them. In this regard, they may draw inspiration from Confucius himself.

Of course, contemporary Confucianism has to meet with new challenges. China used to be an agrarian society but today, it is to some degree, an urban society strong in industry and hi-tech. When we study this age-old wisdom we should try to find wisdom that can be applied to today’s Chinese society and to the world at large. Meanwhile, though Confucianism is still part of humanities, it is also applicable in the study of the metaphysics of morality and political philosophy, as well as in a number of other academic fields, such as ethics, law, science and technology, rural construction and urban governance; as such, it could well bring benefits to the eras ahead.

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