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# “Confucian Revival” From Both Chinese and Western, Ancient and Modern Perspectives: Observations and Reflections on Post-Millennium Research Into Confucianism

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**Abstract:** Confucianism in the new millennium has enjoyed a revival, a resurrection even, like a “wandering soul.” Due to this resurgence, whether it is regarded as an object of study, or as part of modern academic research, Confucianism can no longer be seen as an amalgamated entity, as it was in the last century. In contrast, since 2000, research into Confucian thought has changed not just from both Chinese and Western viewpoints, but from ancient and modern perspectives too. In the last century while China responded to the urgent need to modernize, Confucianism, as a system of ideas and concepts that had been part of classical Chinese society, tended to be examined against these historical changes. In so doing, its “resistance” to modernization was emphasized. Post-2000 however, more mainstream scholars have begun to highlight Confucianism as a reflection of the differences between China and the West. The fundamental reasons for the divisions in research today come from researchers in the West and China placing different degrees of importance on different aspects of the philosophy. Moreover, each group’s understanding and interpretation of China’s ancient and modern society differ.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Confucianism research, “Confucian revival”, change between the past and the present, modern academic division

Research into Confucius post-2000 can be described as entering a “golden age” unprecedented for more than a century<sup>1</sup> (Meng & Wang, 2017). The “Confucian

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years in particular, Confucianism research has received unprecedented attention. Among the “Top 10 Hot Topics in Chinese Humanities Scholarship” from 2014 to 2018 (there were

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revival”<sup>2</sup> (Guo & Liao, 2018) in recent years has at least three elements to it. Firstly, Confucianism has proved that it is no longer a “relic” of the past (Levenson, 1968) but is in fact dynamic. Secondly, it has been associated with China’s national rejuvenation; it is a cultural icon and a by-word for national identity. Thirdly, research into Confucianism has seen stellar results in numerous areas, especially in its theoretical construct of Confucianism in the context of reality. This amply demonstrates that the study of Confucian thought has undergone a qualitative change since its recent “resurrection.” Hitherto, the subject was usually integrated into Chinese philosophy and individual study. Seen in the context of today’s world, however, these new changes necessitate an urgent re-examination of how and what aspects of Confucianism should be researched.

Post-2000, Confucianism has undergone a resurrection; its revival has seen it termed a “wandering soul.” Though Confucian thought as an object of study and Confucianism as an integral part of modern humanities research are difficult to distinguish, at least now they have been separated, unlike the last century.

As far as the reconstruction of the Confucian tradition is concerned, in today’s world, it is impossible to avoid the problems posed by modernization, and the changes that have taken place through that evolution. Both society and culture, as well as modern academic research—including research into Confucianism, have undergone fundamental shifts, compared to centuries earlier. Whether Confucianism, which was integrated into the fabric of ancient Chinese society and its institutions, is still able to transcend the boundaries of disciplines and specialties and “permeate” all societal, institutional and legislative aspects of life (Zhang, 2003), and whether the ideas and concepts of China’s classical age can be “directly adapted” legitimately to contemporary society, pose inevitable debates for scholars.

This article considers these questions on the basis of reviewing Confucianism and the “Confucian revival” in the context of the recent history of scholarly study and of intellectual thought.

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10 entries per year and a total of 50 for the five years) jointly published by the *Journal of Literature, History & Philosophy* (《文史哲》) and *China Reading Weekly* (《中华读书报》), there are 10 entries directly related to Confucianism. The launch of National Social Science Foundation of China projects in recent years can also illustrate the unprecedented flourishing of Confucianism. According to statistics, from 1991 to 2009, there were 200 Confucianism research projects funded by the National Social Science Foundation of China, accounting for 30% of the total number of projects; and from 2010 to 2015, 464 Confucianism research projects were launched, accounting for 70% of the total number of projects.

**2** Guo Qiyong (郭齐勇), a renowned scholar of research into Confucianism, summarized it by saying, “So far, the evolution of Confucianism in the 20th century and its development over the four decades since the introduction of political reforms following the adoption of China’s reform and opening up policy, undoubtedly shows a comprehensive movement towards a revival in Confucian thought.”

# 1 The “Confucian Revival” in the History of Modern Scholarship and Thought

As Li Hongwei (李洪卫) and other scholars have pointed out, the “cultural conservatism” of the first half of the 20th century does not apply to the “Confucian revival” nowadays, especially in reference to political Confucianism (Li, 2016). Today, in the field of “Confucianism” there are in fact very different, and even opposing views and propositions, including not just debates on the differences in perspective between “Confucianism” and “Confucianism research,” but also the differences between “philosophical Confucianism” (心性儒学) and “political Confucianism” (政治儒学) and the dispute between “mainland Neo-Confucianism” (大陆新儒家) and “modern Neo-Confucianism.” (现代新儒学) As Huang Yushun (黄玉顺) said,

The triple philosophies of Confucianism, liberalism, and Marxism can be said to have been replicated in their entirety and projected onto the internal pattern of Confucianism... Today it includes fundamentalist Confucianism, liberal Confucianism, and Marxist Confucianism ... Confucianism has been split. This split ... is a split in the basic values and value positions ... The only ‘consensus’ in Confucianism today is that everyone calls themselves ‘Confucian scholars’ (儒家). (Huang, 2018, pp. 17–18)

One of the reasons why Confucianism has the potential to “become a discursive tool in the struggle between schools of thought” and why “people are using Confucian discourse to express very different or even opposite values and positions” (Huang, 2018) is that, as a concept, Confucian Thought has existed for 2500 years; it permeated all aspects of society in ancient China. Ideas of Confucianism in different periods, and at different social levels, have often been contradictory, and often over the course of its long, flowing history, academic resources justified its different political ideas and concepts of contemporary society. When it has been through re-examination, Confucianism can also provide a classical basis for different, or even opposite ideas. Additionally, the modern-day concept of “Confucian revival” will eventually lead to different or even contradicting ideas to those of various scholars in the different eras and even those in different schools of thought. If this is the case, how is it that in the new millennium, all these contradictory and incompatible opinions and ideas can somehow be amalgamated altogether into a single notion termed as “Confucianism?”

Why do scholars with opposite positions not distill their principles and declare their own inner voices? Why do they cling to the word “Confucianism,” promoting their ideas of a “Confucian revival” as if they had common or similar claims? Part of the reason is that in modern society, Confucianism has long been associated with national identity in the creation of China’s national and state consciousness.

In order to understand why Confucianism has been identified with national sentiment there are two points to consider. Firstly, even after a century of modernization the power of tradition in social and civic life still remains strong. Secondly, the sense of Confucian ideology and academic orthodoxy had not been destroyed by modern Confucian academics. This article focuses on the relationship between Confucianism research and the “Confucianism revival,” and therefore emphasizes the analysis of the latter.

Throughout its long history, Confucianism’s narrative of “extinction–revival” is seen as the way in which it constructs its own history. This narrative is crucial for Confucianism to develop its historical significance and amplify its influence on everyday life. It may even promote the self-perception of Confucian scholars, in addition to the preservation of Confucianism’s educational doctrine; within this repeated “motif,” Confucian orthodoxy unfolds.

The narrative of “extinction–revival” in the history of Confucianism began in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), when the most condensed and archetypal records can be found in “Confucianism” of *Records of the Historian* (《史记·儒林传》), “Record of Art and Culture” of *The History of the Han Dynasty* (《汉书·艺文志》), and “Confucianism” of *The History of the Han Dynasty* (《汉书·儒林传》).

These documents show that the Han-dynasty scholars’ perception of the history of Confucian thought before and during the dynasty consisted of two extinctions and two revivals: one describes the “decline of the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.E.–256 B.C.E.)” and Confucius’ discussion of rituals and music; the other details “the burning of books and burying of scholars” (焚书坑儒) during the Qin Dynasty (221 B.C.E.–207 B.C.E.), and the Han Dynasty’s continued interest in restoring extinct Confucian teachings. The fact that Confucian teachings continued into the Han Dynasty is not only proof that the dynasty inherited the Mandate of Heaven/*Tian* (天命), but it also indicates a self-positioning of Confucianism during this period.

This pattern recurs in subsequent narratives of Confucian history, typically in the Confucian revival movement of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) and in the response to Buddhism and Taoism by Southern Song (1127–1279) neo-Confucianism.

Despite the rise and fall of ancient dynasties, through the classic orthodox narrative of “extinction–revival”, Confucianism manifested its intrinsic value. From the Qin Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), although dynastic power could cause temporary damage to the transmission of Confucianism (as it had in the Qin Dynasty), the destruction of Confucianism—the path that would lead to the attainment of the Mandate of Heaven—was tantamount to being unable to “attain the Heavenly Mandate” without which a dynasty could not possibly last long.

Thus, from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, it was not that Confucianism had to depend on a certain dynasty for survival, rather that in order to inherit the Mandate of Heaven the dynastic rulers needed to prove that they were able to advocate Confucianism, and at its core, the study of Confucian classics, as proof of a dynasty's legitimacy.

The combination of a rational historical account with a strong emotional component is a key feature of the narrative style of the Confucian doctrine's academic and intellectual history; and was a style that was extremely inspirational. It was precisely for this reason that the "four-sentence teachings" of Zhang Zai (张载 1020–1977) of the Northern Song Dynasty—To ordain conscience for Heaven and Earth; To secure life and fortune for the people; To continue lost teachings for past sages; To establish peace for all future generations (为天地立志, 为生民立道, 为去圣继绝学, 为万世开太平) (Zhang, 1978, p. 320)—have been serving as the core tenet of Confucian orthodoxy for thousands of years and have resonated strongly with its scholars past and present, inspiring a strong sense of purpose and confidence.

More recently, as China's history in the last century shows, when the concept of "All Under Heaven" (天下) was transformed into a national and state consciousness, Confucianism was projected with fervent patriotism, in addition to the strong moral consciousness mentioned earlier. While Confucianism's doctrinal narrative theme of "extinction—revival" might appeal solely to intellectuals within its school of thought, the strong national sentiment of the 20th century has so far, appealed greatly not just to believers in Confucian thought, but also to the Chinese people as a whole, non-believers, as well as intellectuals. When the belief in the notion of "All Under Heaven" was transformed into the belief in China as a nation and state, the revival of Confucian teachings provided people with a cultural identity and gave them a sense of belonging. It replaced the idea of a "distinction between China and foreign lands" (夷夏之辨) that hitherto corresponded to the concept of "All Under Heaven."

Alternatively, it can be said that the awareness of the Confucian revival that accompanied the construction of the nation and state was in fact a "compensatory mechanism" (代偿机制) that functioned in a similar way to the idea of a "distinction between China and foreign lands" that was found previously in the "All Under Heaven" template. Building a sense of identity through culture, establishing a cultural identity, and bringing about cultural pride and appeal are examples of this.

Confucianism had this "distinction" and status partly because in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the classical idea of "All Under Heaven" could not be easily adapted into the modern-day concept of "states," (列国) the construction of the nation and state was inseparable from the self-identification of a national

cultural identity based on traditions. Since modern society had not yet fully developed, “traditions” could only refer to those of the classical era, so Confucianism—which in the past had been culturally dominant—came to represent these traditions and the essence of national cultural identity.

Looking at the modern academic and intellectual history of China, if we take into consideration the ideas of “double variation of enlightenment and salvation,” and the mantra “Seek Solace in Life: Seek the Creation of Cultural Traditions”—a perspective loaded in tension due to its inherent contradictions<sup>3</sup> we will better understand how the consciousness of the Confucian revival was embedded in the inner psychological needs of intellectuals. We will also better understand how, in some cases, this consciousness was deeply concealed in modern academic and intellectual history, or how it could be witnessed openly in social and cultural phenomena, depending on the circumstances of the era. Whether concealed or revealed, the enormous emotional momentum it carried has a significant impact on Confucianism research.

With the abolition of the monarchy in China, the era, during which the study of Confucian classics had consumed every academic, came to an end. Confucianism, with the study of Confucian classics as its mainstay, was redefined into the modern academic disciplines of philosophy and history. Modern neo-Confucianism (现代新儒学) is the product of the philosophical path, while the Historical Text Research School (古史辨) is the achievement of the historical path. From their different approaches, these two fields of study have basically made modern Chinese humanities an academic discipline. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China and with Marxism as guidance, those academics who pursued these two specialties coincidentally revalued Confucianism. In 1954, the April issue of *Reconstruction* (《新建设》) published “Studies on the Thought of Confucius” (孔子思想研究) co-authored by Feng Youlan (冯友兰 1895–1990), Huang Zitong (黄子通 1887–1979), and Ma Cai (马采 1904–1999). The work was collectively discussed by the History of Chinese Philosophy Teaching and Research Section, which came under Peking University’s Department of Philosophy. In May 1957, *Literature, History & Philosophy* published Yang Xiangkui’s (杨向奎 1910–2000) “The Thought of Confucius and His School,” (孔子的思想及其学派) and in August of the same year, *Journal of Humanities of Northeastern Renmin University* (《东北人民大学人文科学学报》) published Jin Jingfang’s (金景芳 1902–2001) “On the Thoughts of Confucius.” (论孔子思想)

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<sup>3</sup> The expression “Seek Solace in Life: Seek the Creation of Cultural Traditions” is taken from Dai Dengyun (Dai, 2007). Yang Chunmei compared to the “double variation of enlightenment and salvation” when she promoted this article in the WeChat official account of the New Historical Text Research School.

After distinguishing between the progressive and the backward aspects of Confucius and Confucianism through class analysis, the essence of all the three articles is to expound the positive values as much as possible.

Extracting some of those popular sayings from the time of Confucius, we can see that they share some basic tenets of Confucian thought from the 1980s, such as rituals and benevolence (仁), loyalty (忠) and forbearance (恕), the Mandate of Heaven, and Confucius' educational thought; themes that were already outlined in the essays published in the 1950s. Articles in the early 1960s, such as Tong Shuye's (童书业 1908–1968) "Research on the Thought of Confucius" (孔子思想研究) published in *History Edition of the Journal of Shandong University* (《山东大学学报(历史版)》), in December 1960, and "Confucius on Benevolence" (孔子论仁) published by *Journal of Literature, History & Philosophy* in May 1961, discussed Confucianism research in the 1950s. In the first 17 years of the People's Republic of China, scholars managed to explore the positive value of Confucianism in their class analysis. In addition, they formulated a methodological overview of the "abstract inheritance method" (Feng, 1957). What is particularly noteworthy is the importance attached to "benevolence" in Confucianism during this period. If we look at the Confucianism papers during this period, we can see that after Pang Pu's (庞朴 1928–2015) "Re-evaluation of Confucian Thought" (孔子思想的再评价) in 1978, it is not coincidental that the structure of Confucianism's "external rites and internal benevolence" (外礼内仁) was gradually elaborated by mainland academics and that, rather than falling out of the sky from nowhere, it had in fact been based on those 17 years of scholarly research. It can be said that the study of Confucianism in China, since the country's reform and opening up, was actually initiated in the 17 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, a period in which it underwent continued research and advancement.

Be it the philosophical or historical path, Confucianism research in Chinese mainland between 1950 and 1966 basically began with class analysis. Confucian thought was then distinguished between progressive (materialist) and backward (idealist). During this period, this type of research paradigm brought the analysis of Confucianism closer to politics, or it was focused on political Confucianism, rather than heart-mind Confucianism. Often it went so far as criticizing and rejecting the latter theory as the dregs of idealism. The differences between these research interests and those of "Hong Kong and Taiwan Neo-Confucianism" (港台新儒家) at that time, are in contrast with the fact that since the new century, "mainland Neo-Confucianism" has generally focused on political Confucianism, while "Hong Kong and Taiwan Neo-Confucianism" has placed more emphasis on heart-mind Confucianism. It cannot be said that there is no connection between them whatsoever, especially in terms of academic heritage.

## 2 The Fracture and Confusion of Confucianism in Ancient-Modern and Chinese -Western Arguments

Compared with the 20th century, Confucianism in the new millennium has changed its position relative to Chinese and Western, ancient and modern coordinate systems. In the last century, although many scholars noticed the differences between China and the West, under the urgent need for salvation and modernization, Confucianism, as the system of ideas and concepts of classical Chinese society, was more often examined in the context of the changes between the past and the present and was emphasized as a “resistance” to modernization, thus becoming an object of reflection and criticism. Even if Confucianism is meaningful to modern life and can be used as an intellectual resource, it must be “modernized.” In the new century, as China’s economy undergoes a rapid rise in development, more mainstream scholars have begun to emphasize the differences of positions taken by China and the West. It reached such a point that the ideas and concepts of Confucianism related to ethics and politics, which were originally criticized, are now gradually being defended and even recognized as qualities that distinguish Chinese traditions from the West.

For example, the Three Pillars of Confucianism (三纲), which have been largely rejected since the May Fourth Movement (五四运动), have once again become the subject of debate<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Fang, 2011; Li, 2012). The conclusion that ancient China was an autocratic society is also considered by some, to be a prejudice leveled against China by the West<sup>5</sup> (e.g., Hou, 2008; Huang, 2009; Wan, 2009). This discussion is very relevant to the study of Confucianism, because if ancient China was not an autocratic society, then the assertion that Confucianism played a role in autocratic society is baseless. Driven by the trend toward political Confucianism, the value of studying Confucian classics has also been re-evaluated. On top of this, scholars began calling for a “Confucian revival” (e.g., Liu, 2016).

Differences exist between ancient and modern eras just as they exist between East and West. Should we focus on the contrast between ancient and modern and then discuss the historical distinctions between China and the West? Or should we give priority to the distinctions between China and the West, with specific

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see the debate between Li Cunshan (李存山) and Fang Zhaohui (方朝晖).

<sup>5</sup> For example, see Huang Minlan (黄敏兰) and Wan Changhua’s (万昌华) debate with Hou Xudong (侯旭东).



emphasis on the examination of their cultural differences, before we contemplate the shift from ancient to modern?

At their most extreme, the former style of analysis ignores the differences between China and the West and merely highlights the changes between the past and the present; the latter ignores the changes between the past and the present, and instead underlines the differences between China and the West.

The root causes of the aforementioned fissures in Confucianism research can be traced to the varying degrees of emphasis attached to these types of analysis: Those differences between attitudes in China and the West; and the differences between ancient and modern times.

The national sentiment behind Confucianism today can explain why scholars are emotionally motivated to focus on the differences between China and the West. In the century-long history of modern Confucianism, even when—in a desperate need to save the nation—it underwent severe criticism, what lay behind it was still the powerful motivation of nationalism. As we can see from the previous analysis, the “extinction–revival” model adopted by Confucianism in ancient societies in recounting its own history not only affirms its intrinsic value, independent of the rise and fall of dynasties, but also inspires the highly emotional and moral ethos of “continuing the lost teachings of past sages.” In modern times the “Confucian revival” has replaced the notion of “distinction between China and foreign lands,” and instead provided the Chinese nation with a cultural identity. However, the sense of Confucian revival, which has developed together with China’s national and state consciousness, still has a great appeal to the public far beyond the Confucian community of ancient China, because of its strong national sentiment. This emotional quality of faith of Confucianism has shown different characteristics at different times, and today it is manifested in the call for the Confucian revival in a context that emphasizes the differences between China and the West.

In humanities research, there is no doubt about the significance given to emotional sincerity and the immediacy of affection; however, these emotions cannot obscure our understanding of reality and truth, on which our search for goodness must be premised. Whether it is the disregard of differences between the historical traditions of China and the West and the over-emphasis of the changes in ancient and modern times; or the disregard of the changes in ancient and modern eras that lead to an over-emphasis on the differences between the historical traditions of China and the West, both remove these changes and differences in reality, as well as theory. Since the emphasis on the differences between China and the West has gradually underscored the discourse on Confucian revival, failure to maintain the balance between ancient and modern times, and between China and the West, risks not just further skewing this emotionally-charged argument but those differences between China and the West will

be rendered absolutes, obscuring or negating the questions posed by changing historical perspectives and the differences that exist between China and the West. This paper focuses on the contradictions and possible theoretical blindness as well as the practical disadvantages of the latter style of analysis.

Although Confucian revival or Confucian rehabilitation post-2000 has seen a trend toward emphasizing “differences between China and the West,” (a trend which, for more than 20 years, seems to be reflected in the public’s two-decade long zeal to study ancient Chinese civilization), it cannot hide its alienation, nor its divorce from reality and academic research, nor conceal the resulting confrontation and contradictions between the future and the past.

In fact, regardless of the rise or fall of Confucianism in the academic historical narrative, its power to shape people’s lives has always remained: from the positive emphasis on kinship to the negative emphasis on nepotism; because we are the products of this tradition, reflection is more important than revival. In other words, in the ebb and flow of social change, traditions are not “lost”; Confucian concepts have survived in various forms. Confucianism’s drastic “extinction–revival” is still the trend that flows through the Confucianism narrative and through academic history, while the move toward Confucian revival is still chiefly found in the academic world. This is a reflection of the accumulated dissatisfaction felt within Chinese academic circles due to the loss of its voice in global academia over many years, caused by the wish to pursue the Chinese narrative and by another reawakening of the ancient Confucian “extinction–revival” doctrine, which has been inspired by China’s economic stimulus and rapid economic development.

The current Confucian revival is based on a thesis that emphasizes the differences between China and the West, it cannot avoid the reality that academic research is, in itself, undergoing a transformation as it modernizes with the times, a process that is still far from complete. Through the process of transforming Confucianism from a classical to a modern form, the traditional union between the “study” of Confucius and the “human” element has instead become disconnected and divorced; it is in a state of fracture and separation.

Confucianism today, especially at the theoretical level, exists as part of modern academic research. Historical exposition and theoretical construction in theses and monographs are its main form of existence, mostly realized by professional researchers whose method of realization is argumentative. As we all know, the root of classical Confucianism lies in self-cultivation. According to *The Great Learning* (《大学》), “From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, self-cultivation must be considered by all” (自天子以至于庶人, 壹是皆以修身为本) (Zhu, 2011, p. 5).

Although Confucianism gains vitality from continuous interpretation, theoretically, it cannot exist exclusively in books and, more importantly, it should be practiced in life: offering guidance on how to cultivate oneself physically and mentally; how to regulate family affairs; how to carry out good governance and ensure peace for all under Heaven (修齐治平).

The way to understand classical Confucianism lies in correction, rather than argumentation, which is the way to understand modern scholarship.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if we seek to revive Confucianism in the modern academic system, we are posed with the dilemma of possessing its knowledge, but not its learning; possessing its books, but not its people.

The gradual separation of “learning” and “moral cultivation” in the modern academic system reflects the progress of academic concepts in Confucianism research,<sup>7</sup> but it becomes problematic when considered in the context of Confucian revival. Confucian revival needs not just books, but also people, or at the very least, a certain number of Confucian scholars who might serve as the proponents of its revival. These scholars would work to attain the heights of Confucian morality and classical ideology; they would not pen articles or monographs on it, but instead, would exert moral demands upon themselves, to correct their own thoughts and actions—not those of others.

The “heat” that propels specialist researchers of Confucius can only become the “heat” that fires up research into Confucianism. In the new millennium, when people call for a Confucianism revival, there is a strong impetus from political Confucianism, yet concurrently, a relative decline of heart-mind Confucianism. In addition to the influence of classical Confucianism’s ambition to govern the state well and ensure peace for all under Heaven, the idea that contemporary political Confucianism—which is devoid of classical Confucianism’s need for moral cultivation—should use words and logic to construct better arguments, should also be

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<sup>6</sup> The requirement for self-cultivation has been handed down among Confucian scholars for a long time. Throughout history, many Confucians engaged in such practice. For example, “Whenever Yichuan (伊川) (Cheng Yi 程颐) saw people sitting quietly, he sighed at their good learning” (Huang, 1986, p. 646); Wang Yangming (王阳明) commented on learning: “When instructing others to study, one should not stick to one method mechanically. When some people first begin to learn, they are uncertain and unpredictable. They are mostly thinking about their desires, so they should be taught to sit quietly for a time and free themselves from distracting thoughts. After doing this for a long time, when their minds are a little more settled, they can be taught to self-examine, discipline and reform themselves” (Wang, 2015, p. 20).

<sup>7</sup> For the contradictory impact of the academic tradition of “integrating learning and moral cultivation” on modern scholarship, especially on Confucianism, see Lin Qing (林青) and Yang Lina (杨丽娜) (2019).

a factor in this development. The deeper problem, however, is the academic reality that “learning” and “moral cultivation” are separated.

### **3 The Collision between the Integrity of Confucianism and Modern Academic Specialties**

In ancient China, all strata of society, family, ideas and concepts were enveloped by Confucianism, and Confucians were a key part of the intellectual community. Inside the box of “Confucianism,” different forms of Confucianism were allowed to develop, but “Confucian studies” outside the “box” could rarely survive. “Confucianism research” can be found outside the box. The concept of “Confucianism research” (with “Confucianism” as the object of study) only becomes possible in a modern society where the imperial system is no more, and the majority of the intellectual community is no longer Confucian but made up of scholars who remain outside the “box” of Confucianism.

However, although classical and modern are conceptually opposite, they both fall into historical reality, like ripples that have kept flowing down the same long river of time. The hundred-year history of modern scholarship is the history of the transformation of the classical academic paradigm into the modern academic paradigm. The coexistence of classical and modern academic paradigms and ways of thinking, and the combining of national sentiments, practical concerns, and academic research have resulted in the mixing up of “Confucianism” and “Confucianism research.” When Confucianism was still mainly used as an object of criticism or was even regarded as an intellectual resource requiring modernization, the impact of this confusion on academic research was not obvious. But when Confucianism becomes the source of values in researches, it became imperative to distinguish between “Confucianism” and “Confucianism research.” The aforementioned split within Confucianism is also partly due to the fact that there is no differentiation between the idea of Confucian revival— which takes Confucianism as an intellectual resource and a set of values, and Confucianism research, that regards Confucianism as an object of investigation or as an intellectual resource to be transformed.

In parallel with the Confucian revival, some scholars have identified themselves with Confucianism. Unlike other humanities-related research into modern society, a striking phenomenon in Confucianism research today is that as an object of study, it has largely influenced the self-identity of many researchers. If we attend an academic seminar on Daoism, it is rare to find an institute or college where a researcher claims to have been converted to Daoism; or who has become a

Daoist priest or monk, as a result of the influence of his or her research. The same is often true in areas such as Buddhist and Christian studies. However, if we attend seminars on Confucianism research, we may meet more than a couple of scholars who, while undertaking their research, will also claim to be Confucians or to believe in Confucianism. Therefore, not only do the boundaries between “Confucianism” and “Confucianism research” need to be clarified, but there is also a need to have a basic awareness of the distinction between practicing Confucians and scholars of Confucianism. Additionally, we need to make a fundamental distinction between claims by Confucians and those findings made by research scholars. If a paper written by a Buddhist, Daoist, or Christian writer shows a disproportionate imbalance toward their subject, it cannot be considered a research paper; thus, a favorably-written paper by a Confucian devotee cannot be equated with a Confucian research paper.

After making the basic distinction between Confucianism and Confucianism research, we also need to pay attention to the influence of the integrity of classical Confucianism on modern scholarship. If we pay some attention to the history of scholarship in recent years, especially to the major events related to Confucianism research, we find that in the “Dialogue of World Civilizations” the themes that have flourished post-2000 are Confucianism and Christianity, and also Confucianism and liberalism. These themes reflect the fact that Confucianism is not only a study of life and practice, it also has a religious aspect—in ancient China, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were often referred to collectively; additionally, it also contains elements of ancient political science.

Looking at how modern academic study can be sub-divided, as Confucianism contains elements related to the progress of human life and religious beliefs, undoubtedly it can be the object of religious study. Similarly, as it contains elements of philosophy, ethics, political science, sociology, and economics, naturally, it can also be studied within these and other disciplines. However, when academic research is no longer satisfied with its own professional field and there is the need to integrate disciplines where problems lie at the core, it ventures into interdisciplinary research. In this kind of research, if we are not vigilant about the integrity of Confucianism, it becomes easy to simplify complex problems. As a popular Western saying goes: “Hold a hammer in your hand, and everything looks like a nail.” In the case of Confucianism research, the root cause of multifarious social problems can be attributed to morality. This makes it possible to ignore the results of research in various disciplines and create an illusion that classical Confucianism is “straightforwardly related” to modern life.

In ancient Chinese society, where the family and the state were considered as one, the notion of learning meant the study of how to cultivate oneself, regulate

family affairs, govern the state well and ensure peace for all under Heaven. Confucianism's integrity, being determined by ancient China's theocratic monarchical society, was not questioned at all. But after imperial rule ended, the scholars who were building the modern academic system were not dedicated enough and paid insufficient attention to the topic of integrity. Of course, the understanding of Confucianism's fundamental integrity rarely poses a problem in modern academic sub-disciplinary research where there are relatively clear areas of specialization. It is only when our academic research is oriented toward the awareness of social issues and when it breaks the boundaries of academic disciplines to solve specific social problems can there be a greater chance of collisions as the different disciplines come together.

For example, the ethical and moral view of history held by Confucianism tends to attribute the rise and fall of dynasties and social disorder to morality. When reflected in modern academic research, it is easy to attribute the social problems of today to morality too,<sup>8</sup> and subsequently, when proposing solutions from morality, it is easy to move from ethics research into the field of law and political science. The debate between Chen Lai (陈来) and Ren Jiantao (任剑涛) on the issue of public and private morality in 2020 is a typical example of the clash of different perspectives between ethics and political science (Chen, 2020; Ren, 2020).

Zhang Xuezhong (张学智) also pointed out in 2002 the negative impact of expectations on the academic research of Confucianism's integrity: "On China's mainland, there is a misconception in 20th century Neo-Confucianism research that academics are expected to cover the whole world. Neo-Confucians have such expectations and researchers assume Neo-Confucians will do so." (Zhang, 2003) This is perhaps even more relevant to Confucianism research in the context of the Confucian revival today.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

In 1965, American sinologist Joseph R. Levenson published *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, concluding that the Confucian tradition was dead. In the 1980s, Tu Wei-ming (杜维明) responded to this highly influential assertion in the international sinology community with the "Three Phases of Confucianism" (e.g., Tu, 1980, 1989). Mr. Tu's philosophy of restructuring and modernizing the Confucian

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, although intellectuals of the May Fourth period criticized Confucianism while calling for the "transformation of nationalism," they mainly criticized ritualism, and their idea of "transforming nationalism" still followed, to a certain extent, the Confucian way of thinking that attributed the rise and fall of government and chaos to morality.

tradition had a great impact on the study of Confucianism in the context of contemporary Confucian revival in China. Many studies today can be seen along the lines of Mr. Tu's vision at that time. This is not only because his response was the earliest, but also because his "challenge-response" approach of retorting to the challenges of Western culture with regards to Confucianism is in line with the basic rationale of the study of the history of scholarship and thought in modern and contemporary China. Mr. Tu felt the urgency of reconstructing Chinese tradition in the European and American contexts, and his choice of this path had much to do with his experience and insight as an Overseas Chinese. However, from the perspective of scholars within China, the restructuring of tradition must go beyond the basic idea of "challenge-response"; they should not only regard Western culture as a "challenger" but should really, from the perspective of keeping Chinese culture predominant, consider which elements of Western culture are worth learning from, and which of them can be corrected and rectified. As Gan Yang (甘阳) put it in 1988, "Confucianism is not about how to meet the challenge of 'Western culture,' but about how to work together with 'Western culture'—the direction of 'spiritual science' research—to promote human values."

The study of Confucianism in the new century once again stands at the crossroads between ancient and modern times and between China and the West. The rapid development of China's economy and the rising standard of living of its people are supposed to better facilitate the transformation of Chinese culture from traditional to modern cultural forms. While it is important to recognize the strengths that exist, it is more urgent to recognize the weaknesses that need improvement. A genuinely strong person is one who is happy when he or she is told about a weakness and can then change it; a truly confident nation is one that is capable of self-reflection and can repair its cultural deficiencies. One's true cultural self-confidence lies not only in eulogizing and promoting one's existing strengths and core beliefs, but also in being able to examine, criticize, and correct oneself and discover one's cultural misconduct and psychological failings that go unnoticed; in the same way, not using the excuse of "it has always been like this" to avoid treatment and change. In terms of the relationship with one's own historical traditions, as far as individuals are concerned, true filial piety (孝) is never just about "obedience" and obeying everything said by their parents and forefathers, but about personally preserving the strengths of their parents and forefathers yet finding their shortcomings and correcting them. In terms of national history, our relationship with tradition is not just about preserving it, but also about developing it.

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