

Impact of Modernism on Confucianism: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Modern Chinese philosophers' thoughts and ideas, and their approaches towards adopting Western sociopolitical systems, democratic values and Western logic to synthesizing Chinese and Western ideas positively. Yan introduced Chinese intellectuals to the theories of evolution and capitalism, as well as to social and political ideas: liberty, democracy, legal systems, etc. Since the people were endowed with natural, non-transferable rights such as life, property and liberty, the reason they formed the state through social contract was to protect their natural rights. Without liberty, man and civilized society could not exist. In launching both the literary revolution and the new culture movement, Hu advocated one clear goal: to reject China's old culture in favour of Western culture. The Western tricks no longer work now'. What China needed was a new culture based on Western Values, especially science, democracy and pragmatism.

Recent Trends in Confucianism:

Because of the rapid radical momentum in late 19th-century during Qing Dynasty in China surfaced, the citizens started departing from the thoughts of Confucianism. But, after successful quo against the Qing Dynasty in 1911, even then the long lasting customs and rituals set by the Confucianism could not be eliminated at once, because this philosophy by Confucius is considered like a religion in China being the primitive ideology and has virtually become the ethical way of life of general public. It is believed the first attack was made at Confucianism, with the intellectual work with approach of, 'Down with the house of Confucius', and subsequently it remained successful with literary revolt, and ultimately the absolute attack against Confucian or feudalism was made under the Communist rule. This effort, although with some elements of modern approach are in the long run even in today's China. Against the historic contextual ground, in addition to earlier thought, it is understandable to the 1st rational ideological brawl, in an effort to revolutionize the primitive Chinese ideology, the country's witnessed another movement which was to introduce western pattern of social and cultural life with addition to the knowledge of science and reason in China. Therefore, the history witnessed, there were several Chinese political leaders and intellectuals, who were led by Yan Fu went on to advocate, for adoption of several levels of western approach broadly 'Westernization': while taking western ideas 'borrow' and implement them in China even in partial way against the 'total Westernization'. Now I share modern Chinese thinkers' thoughts and ideas, and their approaches towards adopting Western sociopolitical systems, democratic values and Western rationale to develop synchronization of Chinese and Western ideas.

Yan Fu: A Modern Chinese Philosopher

As China already remained in contact with Western ideas, initially through missionaries,¹ it is generally believed in China that that Yan Fu (1854-1921) was the founding father in this manner who made a serious efforts in introducing western philosophy in China in various walks of life including science, politics, philosophy, psychology and law. Yan presented Chinese thinkers to the theoretical growth pertaining to capitalism, and even in areas of social and political philosophies including: personal freedom, self-rule government, legal mechanisms, etc. But, many believe that Yan himself was not a philosopher rather he was mere a translator therefore Yan never made any attempt to introduce his self-ideology or philosophy but he continued translating western ideas for the welfare of the Chinese society. Besides other productive ideas of westernization, Yan made a valuable contribution in introducing the theories of evolution and fundamental [natural] rights of the human being. Yan was the man who also developed a comparative analysis of

Chinese and the western civilizations. Yan even went on to introduce 'natural right' idea for a man and this idea too had basis in the western and liberal thoughts of the westernization. The critics believed Yan was strongly influenced by Rousseau, especially regarding the relationship between the State and the Society or the individuals. Yan believed 'liberty' was the most important right of the man among all other fundamental rights.²

Sun Yatsen: A Modern Political Scientist

As widely considered as the founding father of the Republic of China, Sun (1866-1925) always was loved by tens of thousands of Chinese nationals even today. Although, being a philosopher and a political leader, Sun could not accomplish all the objectives and goals he set to achieve in his life, but even then he was and still is the most impressive political figure in modern China. Sun was directly related to political nourishment of the State of China, therefore, his philosophy evolved in 3 decades gradually. The critics believe Sun conceived some ideas in the 1890s; and he developed other ideas much later; and in its final shape, his political thought was expounded in *The Three Principles of the People*:

- * 1st code was nationalism. Sun proposed the idea of nationalism to obtain countrywide unity among all the races residing in China.
- * Second principle was democracy. Sun went on to propose, which emerged later as an ideal political system to replace China's old-fashioned model of governance.
- * The third code was livelihood.

Hu Shi: A critic of Confucianism

Since 1917 China's philosophers have been witnessed highly influenced by the 'new cultural movement' or in broader perspective the 'renaissance' of China, there were some opponents as well and the widely known is Hu Shi (1891-1962). Critics share that in very start, Shi opposed old culture of China and advocated for adoption of western philosophy because he himself studied western civilization while residing in western world, therefore, he believed it was mandatory and the need of the hour to revolutionize old China. He says:

"I know there are some people who love old Chinese culture and refute the advent of new thought of modern era, but let me assure you they are fools who have no experience of the western world and we need to accept they are superior to all other cultures in the world. Therefore, you need not to be fooled by such orthodox but start adopting modern ways of life like science and technology to advance in the fields of modern knowledge, arts, culture, music and even physical appearance."³

Hu believed Confucianism honestly has laid down the base of China's old customs and values. However, he shared that due to its deep rooted foundations, the same Confucianism was the sole responsible for the

worries and woes of modern China. So, Hu shouted: "Down with the house of Confucius!" Therefore, what we needed in modern times, is to adopt modern culture, modern values, modern customs and ways of life and the governance as well.⁴

Chen Duxiu: The Chinese Lenin

In the historical journey of Marxism in China, the significance of Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) – widely known as Chinese Lenin - is almost self-explanatory. Chen is the founding father of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and headed it until 1927.⁵ Chen believed "only Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy" can save China and it has the potential to cure all woes and worries of China through the lens of modern ways of dealing social fabric."⁶ In other words, Chen advocated to immediately adopt science and democracy to grow broadly.⁷

Modernism and Neo-Confucianism:

Confucianism is often characterized as a system of social and ethical philosophy rather than a religion. In fact, Confucianism built on an ancient religious foundation to establish the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society. It was what sociologist Robert Bellah called a "civil religion," the sense of religious identity and common moral understanding at the foundation of a society's central institutions. It is also what a Chinese sociologist called a "diffused religion,"⁸ its institutions were not a separate church, but those of society, family, school, and state; its priests were not separate liturgical specialists, but parents, teachers, and officials. Confucianism was part of the Chinese social fabric and way of life; to Confucians, everyday life was the arena of religion.⁹

The founder of Confucianism, Master Kong (K'ung, Confucius, 551-479 B.C.E.) did not intend to found a new religion, but to interpret and revive the unnamed religion of the Zhou (Chou) dynasty.

Peimin Ni says about Xu Fuguan's ideas:

"Self-rule cannot be complete[d] without being combined with Confucianism. Xu contended that Confucianism is like-minded with democracy since it involves people as a society, an idea that seemed in Shang Shu (the Book of History) and other pre-Confucian transcripts. Statements such as 'Heaven looks through the eyes of the citizens, Heaven hears through the ears of the individuals (Shang Shu) show that 'the individuals were not solely 'the ruled' who were under the rulers; they were the representatives of Heaven and the gods, above the rulers'.¹⁰ This spirit was hereditary by the Confucians, and was being visibly reproduced in Mencius' statement that 'the citizens are the most vital; the spirits of the land; the ruler is the least important'.¹¹ Mencius also made it visible that the citizens have a right to dissident and to revolt against powerful rulers. Xu found out that

even the concept of a state- run by the citizens existed in Mencius in a rudimentary form,¹² though Mencius never knew a mechanism that could put the code into social practice.”^{13 14}

After China achieved huge success in its economic-financial system, the reformation of its political system is also on the agenda of the Communist Party. There is almost a compromise that the path of China's political reform is lying its self-rule. However, there is still a big question that either China needs to find its roots of development and progress in the values, ideas and democratic setups of the western world or it should follow its own traditional way of culture and governance to reform its political structure in modern way to give it a natural outlook. There are quite different viewpoints of different groups who have initiated debate that either the China should continue with philosophical settings set by Confucianism, which definitely downs play the liberty of citizens and is the main hurdle in the way of genuine democratic rule, thus, should be thrown away. Some of them further believe that traditional culture and customs must be respected and synchronized with the concept of western civilization to protect individual liberty;¹⁵ and adopt a unique form of democratic practice - communitarian while appealing to the democratic spirit having roots in Confucian moral traditions.”¹⁶ Bell believes that “the harmony between Confucianism and the self-rule is not mere displayed in some politically maneuvered allegations related to Confucian philosophy like the “individuals as the code” & “individuals are superior,” and also personified in basic principles of old fashioned Confucianism, particularly the original Confucianism of Pre-Qin time.”¹⁷ The genuine of democratic government is “rule by people.”¹⁸ The main concept of democratic government include: [any] political power is definitely emerged from the doors of the people; only those people can rule the people who are elected by the people and represent them and the operate the political government; and furthermore, all the common men have absolutely equal rights to share and participate in political affairs of the state. Though not very definitely stated and [should] not be more elaborated completely by the later scholars believing in Confucianism, the above connotations can also be found in pre-Qin Confucian classics. For instance, the *Wan Zhang* chapter of Mencius documented a debate was held between Mencius and his pupil Wan Zhang relating to the shift of political authority before the Three Dynasties:

“Wan Zhang questions Mencius that if the emperor Yao had shifted his authority to Shun by his death. Mencius answers negatively as: No! Emperor cannot do so through his own will, only heavenly spirit or the citizens can shift the political authority to someone. Shun's authority was not transferred by Yao, but by unseen world of Heaven, and the people did so. Mencius explains the true connotations of “transferred by Heaven.” He cited a phrase from a classic document of Shang

Shu while saying that “Heaven’s idea is verified in people’s ideas; Heaven’s tryout is confirmed in people’s trial.”¹⁹

Therefore, it can be argued the concept of ‘given by Heaven’ is actually the connotation of ‘given by the People’ if we literally comprehend the phrase in actual sense. So, as per Mencius,²⁰ these are the publics which is the actual source of power generation. Since Shun obtained the emperor’s power not owing to the demise of Yao, but the people were inclined to empower Shun because of his salient feature and dynamic characteristics of his personality. Accordingly, the political power was transferred from emperor to Shun and it was further shifted from Shun to Yu and the power was further shifted from Yu to his son Qi. Indeed, there is a huge difference between demise with orientation of self-abdicated and ultimate descent heritage. But none of the both themselves can gain power of the emperor or the political authority which can only be gained through the votes of people. Accordingly, this is quite vividly compatible with the concept of self-rule. Moreover, as per Mencius’ explanation, Shun was basically a farmer belonging to the eastern minority,²¹ who contained no noble affinity. So, it can be argued from the empowerment of Shun, that anyone with intellect, honesty and noble traits, can become the powerful leader and can even enjoy the powers of the emperor if we observe Mencius’ narration just through the support of the people. This attitude is definitely harmonized with the idea of self-rule that all individuals enjoy equal rights to gain and to participate in the political affairs of the state. Equivalence and the freedom are the basic morals, and the principles which inspire the ideal of self-rule. Yet, neither “all individuals are created equal” nor “citizens have been born with freedom” is a true phrase of genuine human existence in [any] society across the globe. The reality of these claims can neither be verified by experience, nor assumed from the reason. These are solely ontological pledges, or mere religious views, rather than empirical claims. Similarly, Confucian’s stance that “human nature is good” is also such sort of spiritual viewpoint or ontological pledge. Yet, both the Confucian’s view and the western concept of equivalence and promise of freedom that every citizen is sharing things in common, regardless, it is regarded as “freedom” or “decent nature.” Mencius once uttered: “Shun is an individual, [and] I am also an individual.” “Man and man are the same.” Therefore, “Everyman has the ability to become Yao and Shun.”²² So, Confucian theory of “Human nature is good,” alike the western concept of equivalence and the freedom, can also serve as the assumption of self-rule. To those persons who believe in the concept that “human nature is good,” is the reciprocal concept that everyone has the liberty of freedom and liberty, thus, they have the freedom to elect their representative to govern their lives. Citizens’ liberty is another concept which underlay self-rule. This freedom has two concepts of freedom, which include:

- * Citizens' free speech and an action in a community should be valued and safeguarded;
- * Each citizen being a human being, who holds free will, which cannot be negated by anyone else.

It is usually endorsed that Confucianism stresses upon the collective approach which neglects individualism. However, in Confucianism, as per Mencius, there is a different form of obligation which egoism and acknowledgement of free will is the mandatorily requirement for the ideal self-rule. Pre-Qin Confucianism stresses upon that noblemen or "Jun Zi" should have a self-governing individual's integrity. Regardless, under what form of the condition, he should not leave his free will and yield to others. In the court, a civilized citizen should merely obey to the "Tao" rather than the King. In a community, a civilized citizen should remain stick to his personal stance to accommodate the common obscenity. The sovereign approach and free will of a civilized citizen can never be underprivileged, as once Confucius uttered: "You can detention a general [a senior military commander] from the main 3-armed forces, even then one cannot delay the freedom or free approach of a single person."²³ Mencius encouraged a soul he called "giant husband," which was contrary to that of a "concubine." The free will of a "giant husband" shall never be altered by the poverty, or even ruined by the rich and or the luxury, or the yield to threat and power.²⁴ Confucianism also empowers a civilized man's self-determined choice of his personal action, like either it takes or refutes an official place, stay in a point for a lengthier or the shorter period, etc. A civilized man is believed to make such decisions freely as per his personal moral judgment. Simultaneously, Confucianism stresses upon that the civilized man should take duty to the extent of his personal choice. Accordingly, we can make a claim that Confucianism preaches for such sort of individualism which demands individuals to take ethical responsibility: for instance, when everyone has absolute freedom in making decisions, therefore, everyone is supposed to be responsible for every kind of consequences emerging from his decision. Such sort of individualism is also existent in a healthy democratic rule under the law. If we conclude the argument, we can say that as per modern Confucian thinkers and the intellectuals, these basic Confucian ethical principles pave the ways for a philosophical assumption for a healthy democratic rule and even it provides assistance in establishing a democratic culture within a Chinese perspective. According to them, there is no bar between basic Confucianism and the democratic structure in China. The traditional legacy, particularly Confucianism, cannot be termed as a justification to refute democratic rule. Wang Juntao maintains that the democratic structure in China with Confucian spirit may even assist in erecting democratic rule in China for progress and development in modern China.²⁵

Conclusion:

Now I discuss modern Chinese philosophers' thoughts and ideas briefly, and their approaches towards adopting Western sociopolitical systems, democratic values and Western logic to synthesizing Chinese and Western ideas. Yan introduced Chinese intellectuals to the theories of evolution and capitalism, as well as to social and political ideas: liberty, democracy, legal systems, etc. Since the people were endowed with natural, non-transferable rights such as life, property and liberty, the reason they formed the state through social contract was to protect their natural rights. Without liberty, man and civilized society could not exist. Just as his life was directly related to the political events, of China, Sun's political philosophy also evolved gradually over three decades. The second principle was democracy. Sun proposed that the best political system to replace China's dynastic system was democracy. In launching both the literary revolution and the new culture movement, Hu advocated one clear goal: to reject China's old culture in favour of Western culture. The Western tricks no longer work now'. What China needed was a new culture based on Western Values, especially science, democracy and pragmatism. Confucianism is often characterized as a system of social and ethical philosophy rather than a religion. In fact, Confucianism built on an ancient religious foundation to establish the social values, institutions, and transcendent ideals of traditional Chinese society. It was what sociologist Robert Bellah called a "civil religion," the sense of religious identity and common moral understanding at the foundation of a society's central institutions. Confucianism was part of the Chinese social fabric and way of life; to Confucians, everyday life was the arena of religion. It is nearly a consensus that the general direction of China's political reform is democracy. However, there is still a question that if China should adopt exactly the same presuppositions, ideas and mode of western democracy, which is rooted in the profound and very complex tradition of western culture, or should China find from its own cultural resource some tradition that may support the modern democracy thus to make China's political reform more natural and follow a rational line. Other scholars believe that attempts to justify democracy in Chinese societies must indeed acknowledge its moral traditions; appeals to Western concepts of individualism are less likely to be successful; and "a more communitarian form of democratic practice might have appeal in societies with Confucian moral traditions." Bell says that "the compatibility between Confucianism and liberal democracy is not just only shown in certain Confucian political allegations such as "take people as the principle" and "people are superior," but also embodied in some fundamental principles of traditional Confucianism, especially the original Confucianism of Pre-Qin time." The original meaning of democracy is "rule by people." The basic ideas of democracy include: any political power is ultimately originated from people; only those who authorized by people may represent people to operate the political power;

and all ordinary citizens have equal rights to participate political affairs. Emperor cannot give the power to anyone by his own will, only heaven and people can give the political power to someone. Shun's power was not given by Yao, but by Heaven, and by people. Authority and validity of political power can only obtained from people. This thought is obviously compatible with the idea of democracy. This attitude is compatible with the democratic idea that all citizens have equal rights to participate political affairs. Equality and liberty are the basic values and principles which underlying the ideal of democracy. "Man and man are the same." Individuals' freedom is another principle that underlying democracy. Wang Juntao says that to get democracy rooted in the spirit of traditional Chinese culture will surely benefit the healthy development of modern democracy in China today.

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