

SYMPOSIUM: DEBATING RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

THE RELATION BETWEEN CONFUCIANISM AND CHINESE POLITICS: HISTORY, ACTUALITY, AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the relation between Confucianism and Chinese politics in the history, actuality, and future. The focus is on the special relationship between Confucianism and Chinese politics. First, the author provides a brief historical reflection on the relationship between Confucianism and Chinese traditional politics and develops three dimensions for such an interpretation. Second, the author explains the need for a Confucian renaissance in contemporary Chinese politics. The article then turns to the contemporary controversy about Confucianism and Chinese politics in mainland China. Jiang Qing's conception of Confucianism as state religion is then juxtaposed with Chen Ming's articulation of Confucianism as civil religion. In conclusion, the author argues that Confucianism should serve as an ethical resource for the state constitution, as well as a resource for social governance and cultivation.

KEYWORDS: Confucianism, Chinese politics, state religion, civil religion

CLARIFYING THE THESIS

When we discuss the relation between religion and politics, we should begin by acknowledging their inextricability. In any religion, one will find political, social, and cultural problems. Western political liberals often mistakenly believe that their cherished value of separation of church and state is found also in Confucianism, in which *neisheng* (the supreme morality internalized as cultivation, 内圣) should be divorced from *waiwang* (the supreme morality externalized as governance of virtue, 外王). On this view, Confucianism introduces a divide between morality and politics.¹ Secondly, we might ask why the debate over whether Confucianism is a religion (*rujiao* 儒教) or a philosophy (*ruxue* 儒学) has been so heated in recent years in mainland China. The so-called New Confucians in mainland China are obviously dissatisfied with those in Hong Kong and

1 For example, modern New Confucian Mou Zongsan claims that traditional China had no political rule, only governance, because it was monarchy; thus the politics of Confucianism would be fruitless to current politics. See Mou Zongsan, *Zhengdao yu Zhidao* [Political rule and governance], (Guilin: Guangxi Normal Teacher's University Press, 2006), 1–25.

Taiwan, who consider Confucianism to be Chinese philosophy, focusing especially on the philosophy of Cheng Zhu and Lu Wang in the Song-Ming Dynasties. The New Confucians see these figures as distorting the doctrines founded by Confucius. In order to emphasize the distinctive character of Confucianism in comparison with Western philosophy, and to pay more attention to the indigenous Confucian tradition focused on self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身), keeping your family in order (*qijia* 齐家), governing the state effectively (*zhiguo* 治国), and bringing peace to the world (*pingtaixia* 平天下), the study of Confucianism must penetrate into the reality of Chinese politics and society.² Therefore, interpreting Confucianism as a religion is a fruitful way for mainland scholars to foster political and social development in China.

The debate over Confucianism between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China is the background of my article. Even before this debate began, there were disputations about the character of Confucianism. In the 1980s, Ren Jixu and his disciple Li Shen researched this question, arguing that Confucianism is a religion, but they took an atheistic attitude, criticizing it as a backward ideology. In the 1990s, the debate about the religiosity of Confucianism was represented by Guo Qiyong and Tu Weiming, who claimed there was religion in Confucianism. However, they did not answer the question of whether Confucianism is fundamentally religious.³ Unlike the contemporary debate, these previous debates were largely confined to the academic world and had little impact on China's political and social development.

The focus of this article is not the Western definition of religion, which in China applies to Chinese Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, but not Confucianism. To what extent is Confucianism a religion? Although the question is debated, Chinese scholars have largely agreed that Confucianism is different from Western religion. The term *religion* was transmitted from Japan to China in the late nineteenth century. In Chinese, *zong* (宗) refers to the ancestor. *Jiao* (教) refers to cultivation and learning from ancestors.⁴ Confucianism is focused not on God (heaven), but on human moral virtues such as honesty (*cheng* 诚) and piety (*jing* 敬). Because of this distinction, Confucianism has never given rise to religious wars.

There are various models for relating Confucianism and Chinese politics. Zhang Jian has described these in three dimensions: (1) theocracy, in which religion and political power are totally connected, such that the religious leader and the political leader is the same person, (2) state orthodoxy, in which one religion is advanced as the official state ideology, and (3) religion and politics are correlated more loosely.⁵ In my opinion, the terms *theocracy* and *state orthodoxy* have such a stark Western background that they cannot accurately describe the relation between Confucianism and Chinese politics. In his article for this symposium, Pan-Chiu Lai refers to the model of subordination of religion to the state, which emphasizes the state's coercive power over

2 There have been written criticisms and responses between Confucians in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China since 2015. In 2016, there was the first dialogue between them in Chendu city of Sichuan Province. The main contents were published in *Tianfu Xinlun*, no. 2 (2016): 1–82.

3 For a concrete description, see Zhang Zhigang, "Rujiao zhi Zheng Fansi" [Reflection on the controversy about Confucianism], *Wen Shi Zhe*, no. 3 (2015): 98–168. Regarding the comprehensive controversy in mainland China, see Ren Zhong and Liu Ming, eds. *Rujiao Chongjian: Zhuzhang yu Huiying* [Rebuilding Confucianism: claims and responses] (Beijing: Chinese Political and Law University Press, 2012).

4 See Yao Xinzong, "Religion and Zongjiao: Zhongguo yu Youtai-jidujiao Youguan Zongjiao Gainian Lijie de Bijiao Yanjiu" [A comparative study of the understanding of religion between China and Christian], *Xuehai*, no. 1 (2004): 87–95.

5 Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo Gudai Zhengjiao Guanxishi* [History of state-religion relations in ancient China] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 2012), 23–49.

religion.⁶ I argue that this model fails to explain the Confucian account of religion and politics, as Confucianism is neither monotheistic, nor a transcendental religion. Instead, it permeates the life of a society. Because Confucianism itself aims to cultivate and improve the temporal world, politics is but one of many ways for it to realize its sacred mission of cultivating human life.

The focus of this article is the relation between Confucianism and Chinese politics. I start with a reflection on the history of this relationship because I believe historical perspective can foster a deeper understanding of the present. I then describe and analyze the contemporary state of the relationship between Confucianism and Chinese politics. I conclude with an assessment of the role of Confucianism in contemporary public life in China.

CONFUCIANISM AND TRADITIONAL CHINESE POLITICS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

An understanding of history is essential to understanding contemporary Chinese society. There are three dimensions to consider in interpreting the relation between Confucianism and traditional Chinese politics.⁷

Oneness of Sage and King

Confucianism originated in Chinese traditional religions. Confucians were the religious leaders tasked with providing ritual sacrifice to heaven and earth in early political forms.⁸ This is true especially for the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, in which religious and political power were highly integrated. The sacredness of the political leader was understood to come from the grant of heaven, which ordered the leader to a rule of virtue. Thus the political leader, epitomized by Zhou Gong (ca. 1100 BCE), was not only self-cultivated but also exerted virtue to protect people by way of ritual and music (*liyue* 礼乐). Zhou Gong represented the Confucian ideal of realizing an integrated supreme morality internalized as cultivation and externalized as virtuous governance. Confucianism was thus acknowledged as an official political doctrine. But there was never again in reality the oneness of sage and king represented by Zhou Gong. When the later Confucians invoked the time of Zhou Gong, the ideal was deployed above all to criticize the shortcomings of their own society.

Confucianism as One of the Schools of Thought

In the Spring and Autumn (ca. 770–476 BCE) and Warring States (ca. 475–221 BCE) periods, ritual and music came to be viewed as decadent, and the idea of the oneness of sage and king ceased to exist. The school of Confucius was but one of many influential schools of thought. It affected politics by assisting the king and cultivating the masses. Confucianism was criticized by Daoism and Mohism,

6 Pan-Chiu Lai, “Subordination, Separation, and Autonomy: Chinese Protestant Approaches to the Relationship between Religion and State,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 35, no. 1 (2020) (this issue).

7 There are a great many forms of Confucianism found in history. The famous scholar Li Shen has argued that Confucianism has been understood as a distinct religion since Dong Zhongshu, while before that it was understood to be but one part of traditional religion. See Li Shen, *Rujiao Jianshi* [A simple history of Confucianism] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal Teacher’s University Press, 2013), 1–2, 37–58.

8 See Li Zehou, *Lishi Bentilun* [A theory of historical ontology] (Beijing: Life, Reading and Knowledge Bookstore, 2002), 51–56.

which were also very popular at the time, but Confucius did not see them as heresies requiring refutation. Confucianism emphasized the benevolent spirit behind ritual and music, over against official education. Although Confucius (551–479 BCE) could not be accepted by the kings, he passed down laws for later generations and argued for a virtuous kingship as the source of political legitimacy.

Imperial Confucianism from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty

During the Han Dynasty, the Confucian Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) advised the emperor to give precedence to Confucianism over the other schools. He wanted to reestablish Confucianism as the official doctrine as it was during the Zhou Gong period (ca. ?–1095 BCE), and he wanted to unite the society around the shared doctrine of Confucius by discrediting the other schools. Dong's thought was distinct from that of Confucius, having more in common with Xun Zi (298–238 BCE), who emphasized the adoration of the ruling monarch through canonizing rituals. Imperial Confucianism was modeled as a state ideology supporting the monarchy. But Confucianism was a tolerant system of thought, and there was little persecution or repression of other religions. Thus, many religions supported imperial Confucianism. This settlement remained until the Qing Dynasty collapsed, and the exam system and imperial Confucianism were abolished. From then on, like a specter, Confucianism has haunted modern Chinese state building.

Political rule according to the oneness of sage and king was the Chinese ideal, exemplified in the idea of *datong* (the great unity 大同). Confucianism as one of the schools of thought was full of lively thought and activity. The rituals and music used for cultivation were vigorous and flexible. Confucius himself was neither restricted by any monarch nor limited to Zhou rituals. Imperial Confucianism assisted Chinese politics by integrating China as a single political unit, and the political legitimacy provided by Confucianism served as a check on any abuse of power by the ruler. But it also had disadvantages. First, Confucianism was bound up with the power of monarch and thus could hardly avoid despotism. Confucianism has for this reason been deemed incompatible with modern politics and modern nation building. Second, the inflexible understanding of imperial Confucianism made Chinese politics more and more rigid and narrow. Therefore, after imperial Confucianism was destroyed, modern Confucianism had to engage in a reassessment. Only by rethinking the original Confucian spirit as represented by Confucius can modern Confucianism be made available to modern politics.

A CONFUCIAN RENAISSANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE POLITICS

The Enlightenment and the Crises of Modernity

Religion is being revitalized throughout much of the world, partly in response to the modern moral and political crises caused by the Enlightenment. Modern political science as founded by Machiavelli liberated politics from the requirements of morality and endowed secular politics with absolute autonomy. The Enlightenment criticized tradition and religion, bringing human reason to its culmination. With the withering of religion in public life, politics lost any connection to the sacred and declined toward nihilism.

The Causes of the Decadence of Contemporary Chinese Society

Contemporary Chinese society is plagued by a decadence grounded in the loss of social integrity and credibility. The New Cultural Movement (the May Fourth Movement) totally opposed

tradition and ignored moral cultivation. Having wiped away trust in traditional moral resources, it failed to establish faith in modern values. After 1949, with the impact of Marxism's atheism, all religions were regarded as feudal superstition and were repressed. With the establishment of a market economy, Chinese society has become increasingly greedy and mercenary, given the absence of corresponding institutions and moral cultivation. Corruption is so rampant today that the current Chinese society resembles a society of gangsters. Meanwhile, the state lacks ethical resources to cope with these crises, in spite of magnificent economic development.

The Need for a Confucian Renaissance in Contemporary Chinese Politics

As an important moral resource in Chinese traditional society, modern Confucianism can be revitalized as a public religion capable of addressing the contemporary moral crisis. But why a specifically Confucian renaissance, as opposed to an infusion of other religious traditions? First, because Confucianism has a deep history in China of cultivating politics and morality. The Confucian tradition is embedded in Chinese history and practice. Second, modern Chinese state building requires a shared cultural framework, which neither Marxism nor liberalism can adequately provide. Confucianism can avoid the conflicts wrought by these modern ideologies, providing social consensus and strengthening solidarity among citizens. It can once again support the moral cultivation of Chinese society.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSY ABOUT CONFUCIANISM AND CHINESE POLITICS IN MAINLAND CHINA

Confucianism as State Religion: Jiang Qing

Jiang Qing is one of the most important new Confucians in mainland China. In comparison with the New Confucians in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which emphasize individual morality, Jiang argues for a form of political Confucianism. He argues for elevating Confucianism to the position of state religion it held in the past. This calls for two levels of action. At the top level, the goal is to "Confucianize" contemporary politics by constructing a Confucian constitution. At a more grassroots level, he calls for an infusion of Confucianism, such as faith, morality, and self-autonomy, in all sectors of society through the founding of a Chinese Confucian association. He seeks to emulate Dong Zhongshu in reestablishing Confucianism as the basic principle of the state constitution. In contrast to Western constitutionalism, the purpose of a Confucian constitution is not merely to protect rights, but instead to realize morals, something neglected in Western constitutions.⁹ The more grassroots approach is more practical, and indeed Jiang and his disciples have thus founded non-official colleges in Guizhou Province and a folk Confucian association in Shenzhen City.

Jiang's claims are hotly debated in China. In May 2010, professors Fan Ruiping and Daniel Bell arranged a conference on Confucian constitutionalism and the future of China. The critics mainly were proponents of either Liberalism or New-Leftism. The liberal thinker Joseph Chan argued that

9 Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, trans. Edmund Ryden, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 134–37; 230–233.

the adoption of Confucian values would lead to social conflict and harm civil discourse in a modern pluralistic society. Wang Shaoguang, a representative of the New-Leftism, argued that Chinese socialistic democracy, rather than Confucian constitutionalism, would legitimate Chinese politics. Jiang has produced interesting responses to these critiques of his project.¹⁰ It is unlikely that this debate between Confucianism, liberalism, and new leftism will be resolved any time soon.

The publication of these essays by Princeton University Press, with the help of Bell, led to a further wave of criticism, noting that political Confucianism did not accept Western liberal democracy as an equally “humane” (*ren* 仁) performance, and offered the Confucian “way of the humane authority” as an alternative to Western democracy. Daniel Bell, a Western scholar who has been a sympathetic interpreter of Jiang’s arguments, was denounced as an ideologist who had no self-love and only wanted to think outside the Western box.¹¹ The critique suggested a group of western scholars anxious about the rise of China and the precarious future of the West.

Jiang’s position is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, Jiang is a very strong culture nationalist. Jiang tends to devalue and even show hostility toward the challenge of Western Christian civilization. But excluding Western civilization is not helpful to the identification of Chinese Confucianism to the world.¹² Secondly, influenced by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Jiang wants to endow Confucianism and the Chinese Confucian Association with political privileges. However, this would lead to conflict between Confucianism and other religions, which would feel marginalized in society. Neither is it favorable to Confucianism to be harmonious with politics. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding the Qufu church in 2010. Jiang and ten other well-known Confucian scholars published an open letter protesting the building of the great church in what they called “the sacred city” of Qufu. After that, the bronze statue of Confucius that was erected in front of the National History Museum in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in January 2011 suddenly disappeared overnight on April 21, 2011.¹³ There is no direct connection between these two accidents, but it is obvious that endowing any religion with special privilege by the modern state would lead to dissatisfaction on the part of other religions and lead to social conflict. Kang Youwei exemplifies this possibility.

Thirdly, and finally, Jiang tries to institutionalize Confucianism by imitating some forms of Christianity, such as organized prayer for disciples and the building of similar organizations. These developments are, however, out of step with the distinctive character of Confucianism, which is a religion focused on human beings, and not on God. Confucianism as state religion aims to “Confucianize” Chinese politics, but the more likely result is that Confucianism will be co-opted as an instrument of state power. While Confucianism cannot hope to Confucianize Chinese politics, it could easily be used to decorate a despotic state. (There are important lessons to learn from the history of Imperial Confucianism in this regard, though a discussion of them is beyond the scope of this article.)

10 Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*, 161–65.

11 See Eske Møllgaard, “Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies,” *Dao*, no. 14 (2015): 391–402.

12 The other important culture nationalist is Kang Xiaoguang, who has established a consensus with Jiang Qing. Both are influenced by Samuel Huntington’s theory of the clash of civilizations. Kang has claimed that Huntington was the only man with a great vision of history and globalization. See Kang Xiaoguang and Liu Huiqing, “Confucianization: A Future in the Tradition,” in “China in Transition,” special issue, *Social Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): 77–120, at 117.

13 Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 173–74.

Confucianism as Civil Religion by Chen Ming

As the other leading mainland Confucian, Chen Ming is a moderate, who is more open to the development of liberal democracy in China. Editor of the Confucian journal *Yuan Dao*, Chen is considered a cultural conservative and politically liberal Confucian. His reinterpretation of Confucianism pays more attention to its social and cultural function. Influenced by the American sociologist Robert Bellah's conception of civil religion, Chen believes that Confucianism has two dimensions: one is as a religion understood in the traditional sense, and the other is as civil religion. Historically, Confucianism has tended to play the role of civil religion, and not been understood as a religion in the traditional sense.¹⁴ For Chen, Confucianism as civil religion should first provide the basis of cultural identity in building an integrated state and plural nation, so that different ethnic groups can reach consensus on sacred moral values, such as civil virtue, goodness, and conscience. Secondly, Confucianism as civil religion can provide the basis of sacred values in political and legal institutions. Unlike Jiang Qing, Chen is more willing to consider the grassroots level and communicate with liberal democrats.

In the debate about Confucianism as civil religion, many scholars accept Bellah's ideas and acknowledge the theory of civil society. For example, Ji Zhe characterizes his position as rejecting any use of civil religion as a tool of political legitimation, arguing instead for a secular set of beliefs developed by the citizens of a civilized society. Yang Fenggang suggests that a kind of civil religion based on Confucianism and Christianity could be successfully constructed or developed.¹⁵ However, Chen Ming neither cares about the central theory of civil religion nor accepts its theoretical proposition. His style involves adopting theoretical tools for his own purposes. In this case, Chen argues that one of the important functions of Confucianism is to act as a civil religion.

I am sympathetic to Chen's more moderate position. He is neither nostalgic about a golden age of Confucianism, nor hopeful that a revived Confucianism will defeat Western Christian civilization. Chen tries to respond to the questions of modern China's nation-building and legitimacy of political rule. In his eyes, Confucianism can work as an ethical source of social capital. Since Chen's moderate attitude does not create enemies of Confucianism, it can be accepted not only by other religions, but also can reach consensus with modern liberals and new-leftists. A Confucian Renaissance will require a peaceful environment, which Chen hopes to build by widening its social basis.

Some liberals question Chen's position on secular and pluralistic grounds. They have dismissed the notion of the sacredness of modern society, as well as the placing of Confucianism in a preeminent position in Chinese civil religion. Why should the moral and ethical ideals of Confucianism in particular fill the spiritual vacuum of contemporary Chinese society? Why not seek solutions instead in Christianity, Buddhism, or Daoism? Or perhaps the solution could be a syncretic civil religion drawing on multiple religious traditions.¹⁶ I am sympathetic to the idea that there should be sacred value in modern secular society. This adoption of sacred value should not be dismissed as the source of religious wars. Confucius has said that when you sacrifice to the Gods, you should remember that the Gods exist with you together. It is distinctive for Confucianism that it does not focus on truths about God, but instead on the piety of the person. Other religions are free

¹⁴ Chen Ming, ed., *Rujiao yu Gongmin Shehui* [Confucianism and civil society] (Beijing: Orient Press, 2013), 29–45.

¹⁵ See Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion*, 179–80.

¹⁶ See Zhou Lian, "Nazhong Gongmin? Shui de Zongjiao: Jianping Chenming Rujiao Zhiwei Gongmin Zongjiao" [Which citizen, whose religion? A remark on Chen Ming's Confucianism as civil religion], in Ming, *Confucianism and Civil Society*, 315–27, at 322–25.

to contest the claims of Confucianism, and they could also serve as sources of civil religion. The predominance of Confucianism in civil religion is not artificially endowed, but comes from the historical tradition. As Protestantism is predominant in American civil religion, its status comes also from the American historical tradition.

However, it is sometimes possible to misunderstand Chen's differentiation between Confucianism as a religion and as civil religion. Civil religion sometimes appears to be nothing more than an ideology that is made sacred. The question is how it is to be distinguished from traditional religion. There are two dimensions of Confucianism to consider: one is religion, and the other is cultural cultivation. Thus, on the one hand there is the distinction between religion and civil religion, while on the other there is a distinction between Confucianism as religion and Confucianism as cultural cultivation. History includes examples of both. Confucianism as religion emphasizes respect to heaven and worship of ancestors (*jingtianfazhu* 敬天法祖), supporting faith in the Chinese people, and constructing a public religion system.¹⁷ Although Confucianism has a religious character, the emphasis historically has been on Confucianism as a form of cultural cultivation. The emphasis on cultivation opens space for cooperation and even syncretism between Confucianism and other religious traditions. Indeed, there are examples of other religions being Confucianized by adopting its forms of cultural cultivation.¹⁸

THE FUTURE OF CONFUCIANISM AND CHINESE POLITICS

Confucianism as an Ethical Resource for a National Constitution

The historical record suggests that Confucianism should not be bound up directly with political rule. There is a consensus among mainland New Confucians that it is better for Confucianism to serve national politics through constitutionalism. But in what way can Confucianism connect with our constitution?

Confucianism can first make up for the deficiency of liberal democratic constitutionalism, which only passively limits power, taking instead an active role in making power become benevolent. This is a point Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang have stressed. The national constitution draws on diverse ethical resources, including Confucianism. While Confucianism should not seek to reestablish its former preeminent position, it remains true that the spiritual dimension of liberalism as an ethical resource for the national constitution is too thin. Liberalism cannot adequately engage in the moral formation of the people, and it undervalues the cultivating duty the state bears to the people. Unlike liberalism, Confucianism can be deeply ingrained in the rich and thick soil of Chinese culture and consequently is adapted to serve as an important ethical resource for the constitution. The aim of the national constitution is not only to protect civil rights, but also to promote civil virtue, and for this task Confucianism is well suited.

Secondly, in order to compensate for liberalism, nationalism, and patriotism, Confucianism can provide a basis for the cultural identity needed to foster an integrated state and plural nation. Liberalism, especially in the form of independence referendums, would be harmful to an integrated China. Nationalism and patriotism, if not presented properly, could lead to social chaos. Through

17 Ren Wenli, "Rujiao Zuwei Guomin Zongjiao de Xiangdu Kaocha" [A review of the dimension of Confucianism as a civil religion], *Yuan Dao*, no. 23 (2014): 3–19.

18 Yao Zhongqi, "Yige Wenjiao, Duozhong Zongjiao" ["One cultural religion, some religions"], *Tianfu Xinlun*, no. 1 (2014): 34–41.

the constitution, the benevolence and conscience (仁义良知) of Confucianism can play a significant role in making citizens become more virtuous. All ethnic groups in China enjoy not only equal status through being endowed with passive rights, but also identify themselves with the nation-state by cultivating a sense of the sacred value of the constitution.

For example, the first sentence of the 1982 constitution declares, “China is one of the countries with the longest history in the world. All Chinese ethnicities create a splendid culture together, and have an honorable revolutionary tradition.”¹⁹ Interpreting this text, the famous mainland Confucian Yao Zhongqiu notes that the 1982 constitution emphasizes three points: Chinese history, Chinese culture, and all Chinese ethnicities. This means that political legitimacy in China has shifted from a basis in revolution to a basis in Chinese history and culture.²⁰ Along these lines, Chairman Xi Jinping has emphasized that the revival of Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, is central to maintaining confidence in culture and political institutions. The art of Chairman Xi’s political governance has taken advantage of traditional Chinese culture and governance.

Nonetheless, we should not forget the lessons of imperial Confucianism. For the mainland Confucians, the question is how to avoid the fate of Dong Zhongshu and Kang Youwei, who sought to limit and cultivate the emperor’s power but in the end failed to do so. Power has a natural tendency toward corruption and despotism, and all forms of culture can be co-opted to legitimate even tyrannical leaders. Thus the current Confucians should be wary of political power, regardless of how favorable government leaders are to Confucianism.

Confucianism as a Resource for Social Governance and Cultivation

Confucianism has historically been the main actor in carrying out social governance and cultivation in Chinese society. Drawing lessons from history, the renaissance of Confucianism should not be restricted to academic discussions, but must also deepen into society to develop this mission of social governance and cultivation. Academic Confucianism has focused on Confucian metaphysics, but this focus is at odds with traditional Confucianism. Moreover, most academic intellectuals who do research on Confucianism cannot emulate traditional scholar-gentlemen (*shidafu* 士大夫), because they often deviate from social norms and are ridiculed as dead Confucians.

Firstly, from the perspective of social governance, the approach of contemporary political science is to view society in opposition to the state. Confucianism rejects this antithesis between society and state, emphasizing instead virtuous cultivation of government leaders. In the past, Confucian gentlemen have usually played the role of mediator in social governance, maintaining local autonomy through obeying local customs and rules. Nowadays Confucians can still succeed at this enterprise. Seeking moral renewal and a harmonious local culture, Confucians in the country and city can solve conflicts among groups by deploying current rituals and customs flexibly. In order to avoid the disadvantages endemic to grassroots democratic autonomy as influenced by the Western model, which focuses on voting and on subjective rights, Confucianism can cooperate with the government, which can nominate local elites, following the recommending election system (*chaju* 察举) as practiced during the Han Dynasty.

19 Xianfa preamble (1982), http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372962.htm (official English translation).

20 Yao Zhongqiu, “Cong Geming dao Wenming: Baer Xianfa Xuyan Diyidian Dayi Shujie” [From revolution to civilization: An interpretation of the first paragraph of the Constitution of 1982], *Faxue Pinglun*, no. 2 (2015): 46–56.

Secondly, from the perspective of social cultivation, the propaganda of the contemporary political ideology is obviously not persuasive to the Chinese people. Market-directed commercial ideology creates a society that values only money. It is urgent for society to produce cultivating agents focused on sacredness and the development of virtue. In the past, Confucians established influential local academies of classical learning (*shuyuan* 书院) focused on lectures and intense study. Nowadays we can continue this tradition and open the local academies of classical learning to the public. Through reinterpreting classical learning in relation to everyday life, contemporary Confucians can cultivate the virtues of the people, focusing on virtues such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 义), propriety (*li* 礼), wisdom (*zhi* 智), and sincerity (*xin* 信).

While some scholars have focused on Confucianism as an ethical resource for the national constitution, it is more important for Confucianism to focus on social governance and cultivation. Since the Song Dynasty, Chinese society has become increasingly egalitarian and less hierarchical. Partly for this reason, the great Confucians such as Zhu Xi (1130–1202) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529) paid more attention to social governance and cultivation. By adjusting ancient rituals to satisfy the needs of the people at that time, Zhu Xi created new family rituals (*zhuzijiali* 朱子家礼). Wang Yangming built a neighborhood administrative system and improved local customs and rules. Inheriting this tradition, the great Confucian Liang Shumin (1893–1988) after the New Cultural Movement improved social governance and cultivation through his village reconstruction movement. In contemporary China, the enterprise of social governance and cultivation should be carried forward by modern new Confucians.

Yidan Xuetang (一耽学堂) is a good example. It was built as a not-for-profit organization engaged in the promotion of traditional culture and “transformation of the self and others through teaching” (*jiaohua* 教化). As a *jiaohua* organization, it has placed the emphasis on this-worldly life: how to cultivate the self, to nourish one’s life, and to contribute to society, based on the teachings of the sages and on the resources of traditional culture.²¹ Yidan Xuetang does not intervene directly in politics, serving society instead as a *jiaohua* organization relying on traditional culture and ultimately advocating a national renaissance. Its project is adapted to the government’s call for a renewal of Chinese traditional culture. Some may raise the question of whether Yidan Xuetang is truly Confucian: it neither attaches great importance to the interpretation of Confucian classical texts nor emphasizes Confucian rites, except the ceremony to honor Confucius. The primary character of Yidan Xuetang is *jiaohua*, which presents the mission of Confucianism as a resource for social cultivation. We should avoid using modern categories such as philosophy or religion to describe this character, as it constitutes the essential difference between Confucian philosophy or religion. Only by being grounded in a variety of practices and classical texts can Confucianism realize its moral and political ideals.

Furthermore, as China has become more powerful, prosperous, and self-reliant, many Chinese take comfort from and pride in Confucianism as an expression of Chinese values, traditions, and culture. However, this does not mean that Confucianism will necessarily be exceedingly popular among the Chinese people. In modern pluralistic China, many other values, such as liberalism, nationalism, and new-leftism will repeatedly compete with Confucianism for influence.²² For this reason, we should not identify Chineseness with Confucianism, as Chineseness is full of all kinds of values.

21 See Sébastien Billioud, “Confucian Revival and the Emergence of ‘Jiaohua Organizations’: A Case Study of the Yidan Xuetang,” *Modern China* 37, no. 3 (2011): 286–314.

22 See Hu Shaohua, “Confucianism and Contemporary Chinese Politics,” *Politics and Policy* 35, no. 1 (2007): 136–53.

Today when we discuss the relation between Confucianism and Chinese politics, we can only conceive of Confucianism as one of the schools of thought. It would be impossible for modern China to reestablish political rule on the model of the oneness of sage and king, or to rebuild imperial Confucianism in some other form. Nonetheless, it is important to reconstruct Confucianism in a way appropriate to the modern state and modern society. Whether Confucianism can be revived depends not on whether it can obtain the support of the government as the state ideology, but instead on the extent to which it can answer the many different moral and political questions being raised in China today.