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Item Type	Article
Authors	Chung, Paul S
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
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Download date	2026-07-12 03:20:58
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166557

Confucian Canopy and Social Construction

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Abstract

The notion of public religion in distinction from civil religion refers to a social scientific approach to religion with more emphasis on its public contribution to civil society and religious-ethical orientation in the global context. To deal with Confucianism as a public religion, I undertake a hermeneutical investigation of its religious and humanistic system within a sociological frame of reference, in which focus is given to its prophetic-moral orientation for the sake of ethical humanism and the good society. An attempt is undertaken to explore how Confucianism as a sacred canopy plays a formative role in building a culture of trust in China and further creating the global good society in the social construction of reality.

Key words: public religion, social construction of reality, civil society, humanness, rectification, postcolonial-archeological reasoning, Axial Age

INTRODUCTION

Public theory of religion seeks a new model for overcoming the sharp separation of religion from the public realm. Theologians and scholars, notably in the field of religion and society, have brought the theory of modernization and its upshot of secularization under critical scrutiny. Religion as the sacred canopy is not left behind even in the process of modernization, nor does it lose its spiritual and public dimension. Rather, it is acknowledged as a catalyst, enhancing positive relations among the individual-community-nation.

As Peter L. Berger argues, religion plays a normative role in constructing a sacred canopy of transcendent legitimacy, meaning, and order in the social construction of reality. However, modernity and secularization do not necessarily amount to a decline in religion, while cultural pluralism, driven by the disenchantment of the world (Max Weber), does not always generate a crisis of credibility.¹ Religion is a key (not the key) to comprehending the underlying public life which promotes the common good, moral integrity, and social integration in civil society.

Confucianism was an international religious and philosophic-ethical movement, especially from China via Korea to Japan and Vietnam. In each context Confucianism had been reinterpreted in unique ways, transcending a borrowed model of Chinese cultural life. Historically Confucians have generated a way of life profoundly concerned with all aspects of human life in terms of deeply shared cultural orientations, sensibilities, and achievements, which are still influential today in personal, social and public dimensions in China, South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.²

In dealing with the relationship between religion and public life, civil society, and the state in the Asian context, I shall deal with Confucianism as an example of sacred canopy for investigating religion and Asian public life in a social-hermeneutical frame of reference. I prefer to use the term “public religion” in regard to religious, social,

¹ Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 25, 29.

² John H. and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 1–5.

political, cultural, and ethical systems in a given society and on the globe rather than “civil religion.” The term “civil religion,” which is conceptualized by Robert Bellah, refers to a public discourse related only to typically American national identity and political-religious context. This notion is no longer tenable outside American society.³ This paper develops a comparative and social scientific study of Confucianism in a social-hermeneutical frame of reference, facilitating fruitful exchanges in comparative religious ethics and building a culture of trust for the good society.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: MODERNITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE

To present social scientific understanding of religion in regard to social construction of reality, it is important to analyze the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it is shaped and arises. The sociological focus of the existential determination of human thought requires a standpoint of interconnection with other factors. In Weber’s sociological study of religious ethics and modernity, we observe that the people of Western Europe have unfolded a unique type of rationality through the disenchantment of the world. The Puritan Calvinist ethic became the arbiter in shaping and underpinning capitalist rationality in terms of purpose rationality. However, it is hard to agree with its hidden agenda that seeks to find the origins and engineering of capitalist modernity only in reference to Puritan Calvinism and the Enlightenment.

For global-critical notion of modernity and interconnection we need to include other factors in the sociological study of religion. For instance, Europe’s wealth was built upon the establishment of a great transcontinental, triangular trade and commerce system from the seventh to the nineteenth century. Industrial capitalism and modernization under the hegemony of Great Britain was developed out of resources and capital accumulation through the working people at

³ See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 168–186.

the domestic level and in the colonial system abroad.⁴ A developmental theory and practice, which undergirds Western process of disenchantment of the world, cannot be adequately comprehended apart from global-critical deliberation of the domination and exploitation of the center over the periphery. A sociological theory of modernity, attached to cultural, political, and racial pathologies, can be seen as socially constructed in and through the relationship of interdependence between the center and the periphery. A social reality of modernity and interdependence requires a means of assessing alternative modernities or multiple modernities.⁵

A social-hermeneutical frame of totality or interdependence facilitates social scientific study of religion and society in terms of more engagement, mutual recognition, and renewal. It reinforces hermeneutical method of correlation of religion and society in a critical and revisionist manner, which facilitates our revision of narrative about religion, society, and modernity. Asian contexts are characterized by rich religious traditions, people's multicultural ethos, political diversities, colonized experience, and economic underdevelopment. Given this, a current study of the Axial Age entails implications for the social-hermeneutical frame of reference as it explores religion, civil society, and rationality in a broader context, underpinning a quest for peace, justice, and responsibility.⁶ A study of Confucianism as religious and moral canopy can be enhanced in this direction.

CONFUCIAN TEACHING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

No individual in Chinese history has so profoundly influenced the life and thought of Chinese people as has Confucius (551–479 BCE). He was “a transmitter, teacher and creative interpreter of the ancient culture and literature” in shaping the Chinese mind and character.⁷ Cer-

⁴ Paul S. Chung, *Church and Ethical Responsibility in the Midst of World Economy: Greed, Dominion, and Justice* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 84.

⁵ Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16.

⁶ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷ Wm. Theodore De Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15.

tainly, Confucianism is a misnomer, because it is normally referred to as *ru jia*, *ru jiao*, *ru xue* in the traditional context. The stages of Confucian evolution have demonstrated formation, adaptation, transformation, and renovation in undergoing creative and interpretive periods, as it enters into critical and constructive response to the challenge of Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism.⁸

The two terms, *ren* (goodness in the translation of Waley) and *li* (ritual in the translation of Waley) are pivotal in characterization of the Confucian teaching. *Ren* is the highest virtue because it includes all the other virtues, while it does not lose its mysterious and cosmological quality, as culminated in Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian context. It is not entirely secular. Rather it entails a religious dimension. *Ren* as benevolence is deemed appropriate as the primary translation only from the time of Mencius.⁹ A translation of *ren* as humanness may capture the element of religious, ethical aspiration for an ideal related to the Heaven. *Li* (ritual/propriety) is generalized as a way of relating to the world and fellow humans, while it is expressed in the same ethical depth as *ren*. A virtue of *de* in the sense of noninterference becomes available in setting a moral example, which radiates the virtue of *de* down to the people. Confucian strategy leads the people by *de*, restraining them with such *li*, that they will keep and develop a sense of shame, a feeling of self-respect, and participation.¹⁰

The admonition to treat others in one's interpersonal and public life is undertaken by the golden rule, *shu*: What you do not want for yourself, do not unto others.¹¹ *Ren* and *shu* (paired with *zhong*, loyalty) remain in the core teaching of Confucius, pursuing universally adequate reflection of human conduct through *yi* (righteousness/justice). Confucius lamented that the society and public life are out of joint. Axial China, like the other axial civilizations, was beset in a period of rapid growth—demographically, economically, and militarily and in the midst of political turmoil. Confucius aimed criticism at the reality of moral evil driving the rampant pursuit of wealth, power, fame, dominion, sensual passion, and greed.¹² His task was to set them right,

⁸ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7–9.

⁹ A. C. Graham, *Disputes of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 112–113.

¹⁰ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Arthur Waley (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House; Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1999), 11.

¹¹ Waley, *Analects*, 15:23.

¹² Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 422.

rectifying reality in accordance with its name, which was later radicalized in Mencius's teaching of rectification.¹³

As a transmitter, creative interpreter, and political ethicist, Confucius is congenial to the oldest and most evocative mode of thinking about life's meaning in regard to the Heaven, humanity, and the world. As Herbert Fingarette points out,

Although the narrative mode used in this way is an "archaic" form of thought, it is not any more an archaism in Confucius than it is in a contemporary novel or drama. Confucius used narrative of a mythic past in the service of a new ideal grounded in radically new insights into man's essential nature and powers.¹⁴

Given this, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) was intrigued by Confucius's grounding of radically new insights into human nature, powers, and moral orientation. In the *True Meaning of The Lord of Heaven*, Ricci attempted to connect Christianity with Confucianism, by taking the Catholic doctrines as a complement to Confucianism. Then, he interprets the Catholic doctrines to transcend and transform the Confucian doctrines in several instances. Finally, he also revises Catholic doctrines, seeking concordance with the Confucian ones.¹⁵

For the encounter between Confucian self-cultivation and Catholic moral theology, Ricci especially appreciates Mencius's ethical virtue. Mencius—in Chinese, Mengzi (dates uncertain, but usually known about 390–310 BCE, or probably 372–289 BCE)—took Confucius as his ideal, developing the Confucian doctrine in a religious ethical direction and with an idealistic flavor. Imprinted within his work was the social and political conditions of his time, the warring States (475–221 BCE), which were much worse than the time of Confucius. Mencius takes humanness and justice/righteousness as essential ingredients of true humanity. He develops his theory of four

¹³ However, the so-called teaching of the three bonds (about the relationship between the ruler/minister, father/son, and husband/wife) is charged as authoritarianism. Such teaching which is found in the Confucian classic was only codified later in first century CE Han, in which Confucianism became the ideology of the imperial state. See Daniel A. Bell, ed., *Confucian Political Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8.

¹⁴ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), 68.

¹⁵ Paul S. Chung, *The Hermeneutical Self and an Ethical Difference: Intercivilizational Engagement* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2012), 110–112.

germinations or beginnings in terms of four basic human feelings or dispositions: commiseration, shame and dislike, deference and compliance, and right and wrong. Appreciating Mencius's theory of four beginnings, Ricci inserted the Catholic teaching of sanctification or perfection in accordance with the will of the Lord of Heaven.¹⁶ But Ricci missed another aspect of Mencius's ethics grounded in people's lives. Let us pay attention to Mencius's ethics of rectification for our social-hermeneutical study of Confucian canopy.

MENCIUS AND ETHICS OF RECTIFICATION

According to Mencius, humanness (*ren*), justice/righteousness (*yi*), ritual (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*, knowledge of good and evil) are common to everybody. Mencius denounces the despotic ruler who has brought misery, poverty-stricken life, and moral degradation to the people. What is central in Mencius's political philosophy—all economic and political measures must be established on behalf of the people. Of primary importance are the people; taking the people as the most important factor is central to Mencius.¹⁷ Mencius seeks to radicalize the Confucian doctrine of rectification of names in connection with the life and dignity of the people. The activities of the ruler and the ruled differ, but they are mutually indispensable in the sense of collaborative division. Since Heaven's mandate can be known through the will of the people, the emperor follows their will.

In Mencius's thought there is a tendency of naturalizing Heaven, yet affirmation of theistic element is also found. One who knows one's own nature will know Heaven. By nurturing one's nature and holding firm on one's heart, one serves Heaven. One who stands in awe of Heaven's mandate is capable of stabilizing one's own state.¹⁸ In Mencius's concept of benevolent government, the state should ensure a

¹⁶ Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trans. Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, ed. Edward J. Malatesta (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 367, 369.

¹⁷ Introduction to *Mencius*, trans. Zhao Zhentao et al. (Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House; Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1999), 27; Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Period of the Philosophers*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 113.

¹⁸ Zhao et al., *Mencius*, 31.

constant livelihood for the people and provide economic security, entailing social-humanistic and political implications.¹⁹

Thus it is difficult to establish a blindly loyal relationship among the ruler, the officials, and the people. When the people in power and authority do not rectify their name and position, Mencius advocates even for the possibility of regicide and dethronement of the king and officials. The people have the last word. A version of *vox populi, vox dei* is well expressed. "Heaven sees with the eyes of the people. Heaven hears with the ears of the people."²⁰ To win the unification of the world, the protection of the people should take priority for the ruler.²¹ However, moral power may not work in the face of wicked oppressors and tyrants in the non-ideal context. Thus people may have a right of resistance to depose their despotic rulers, even tyrannicide.²²

Mencius was not an idealistic pacifist at all. His perspective retains revolutionary resonance in contrast to the hierarchical system of patriarchy. Confucian political ethics presents a normative standard with which to judge existing reality and situation, sometimes entering into conflict with the powerful in the government. In Mencius, peace—remaining an undercurrent of political ideal—refers to a united world governed by benevolence (*ren*) for the protection of the people in a non-coercive manner rather than the absence of violence.²³

This said, the argument for *vox dei* and *vox populi* can enhance Confucian teaching for its contemporary relevance to democracy and justice. It is true that Confucianism was attacked by Chinese intellectuals in the names of science and democracy in the early twentieth century. It is argued that although classical Confucianism advocates government "for the people" and/or "of the people," it remains short of "by the people"—democracy.

Thus, deepening the meaning of *vox dei* and *vox populi*, it is important to develop the public dimension of Mencius ethics concerning whether and to what extent Confucianism can be creatively transformed or reinterpreted in a social-hermeneutical frame of reference: for the sake of the cultural, spiritual, cultural, and philosophical basis

¹⁹ Ibid., 7; Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 1:118.

²⁰ *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970), 5A5, 144.

²¹ Zhao et al., *Mencius*, 15.

²² Ibid., 43.

²³ Daniel A. Bell, "Just War and Confucianism: Implications for the Contemporary World," in Bell, *Confucian Political Ethics*, 236.

for democracy and social justice. This argument leads us to examine Weber's analysis of Mencius's notion of *vox dei* and *vox populi*.

MAX WEBER AND CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IN MENCIUS

In his study of religious ethics in Confucianism, Weber notes charismatic leadership in Mencius, according to whom the voice of the people is the voice of God. This is the only way in which God speaks. Weber evaluates an extremely revolutionary resonance in Mencius political ethics.²⁴ In genuine charismatic domination there is a rejection of the bonds of external organization because it upholds no abstract legal propositions and regulations and no formalized legal judgments.²⁵ As Weber holds, a charismatic domination in the context of Confucianism may "[lead] to a revolutionary reevaluation of everything and a sovereign break with all traditional or rational norms."²⁶ Hence "Confucian literati were the bearers of progress toward a rational administration and of all 'intelligence.'"²⁷ No caste order has ever existed in China.²⁸

The Chinese literati-politicians were primarily oriented toward issues of internal administration in contrast to the Jewish prophets who were concerned with foreign policy. The Chinese view on economic policy is typical of patrimonial bureaucratic conditions, which did not encourage free exchange in markets in a purely economic manner and with powerful capitalist interests.²⁹ Along with the charismatic leadership and patrimonial bureaucratic economic policy, Weber continues to maintain that Confucianism reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum. Based on the belief in the ethical goodness of hu-

²⁴ Max Weber, "The Nature of Charismatic Domination," in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 229–230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 226, 228, 230.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁷ Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951), 107.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

man nature, Confucian teaching does not present an autonomous counterweight for confronting the reality of the world.

Furthermore, Weber argues that, "Chinese thought has remained rather stuck in the pictorial and the descriptive," so that "the power of *logos*, of defining and reasoning, has not been accessible to the Chinese."³⁰

Weber senses that Confucianism accommodates to the world. In contrast, Puritan ethics establishes tremendous tension with the world.³¹ Such complex, brilliant, and enigmatic evaluation has aroused debate and controversy.³²

Unlike Weber's argument, however, Confucian charismatic leadership, as seen in light of Heaven's mandate and rectification, has brought its position into tension with the mundane order, on account of its commitment to the people. Together with Mencius's notion of rectification, Xunzi's injunction was not entirely forgotten concerning the ruler: "Follow the *Dao* and not the ruler, follow justice and not the father."³³ Furthermore, in the Neo-Confucian development, Mencian political ethics grounded on the relation between God's voice and people's voice was not entirely lost, but was reinterpreted in different social and political contexts. We shall discuss this matter later as it comes to Wang Yangming.

³⁰ Ibid., 125. Unlike Weber's assumption of the lack of power of *logos* in Confucianism, however, there was a complicated debate over the interpretation of the *Dao* principle within Confucian development. The Neo-Confucian formula "investigation of external things and the extension of knowledge" is highly creative, synthetic, argumentative, and rational in openness to the living voice of *Dao* through the people's lives (Mencius-Wang Yangming). Chung, *The Hermeneutical Self and an Ethical Difference*, 212-247.

³¹ Weber, *The Religion of China*, 227.

³² Thomas Metzger holds that Confucian personality is rather characterized by moral tension, because it is beset by an anxiety-ridden need depending on social superiors for authoritarian guidance. See Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 4.

³³ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 479.

CONFUCIANISM, MODERNITY, AND RITUALS

In our appraisal of Confucianism as a sacred canopy it is important to articulate Confucian contribution to the civil society. It is unfortunate to see that Confucianism is frequently accused by modern scholars as a traditional religion, which generally legitimizes authoritarian rule, hierarchical pedagogy, nationalistic parochialism, and patriarchal systems. Confucian democracy is deemed as a contradictory term. Against this critique, however, modern new Confucian scholars seek to find the seeds of democracy and scientific thinking inherent in Confucianism. They appreciate Confucianism as a public religion contributing toward a new social construction of reality, which upholds an Asian way of modernization.³⁴ Rather, they cast suspicion on Western scientism and individual democracy, because of the consequence of ecological destruction and obliviousness to communal ethical responsibility, which contradict Confucian values and the philosophy of life.³⁵

In the sociological context, religion can be understood as morphology in terms of experience, reason, rituals, and discourse in a social and collective sense.³⁶ Consequently, religion entails symbolic self-transcendence, because it is embedded within human life, cultural ethos, and economic and political rationality. It can also posit a sacred cosmos and rituals in connection with human experience and response.³⁷ This social-hermeneutical frame of reference facilitates an investigation of the important place of religious ritual in dealing with communal experience and public society. It can be undertaken in terms of dialectical relation between individual and society, making the individual into a part of community, as also created by humans. This reinforces social bondage and public moral solidarity.

According to Duhem, society is comprehended as a sociocultural reality of religion. Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices

³⁴ Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³⁵ Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 270–279.

³⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 18.

³⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 27.

that constructs and maintains social solidarity.³⁸ In the comprehension of the socially constructed world, religious ritual as public ritual is a morality-binding force, underscoring a civilized society. This perspective remains crucial in the study of Confucian ritual and public moral reasoning. Social hierarchy and economic equality shape one of the most puzzling features of East Asian societies, notably in Japan and South Korea.

The Confucian philosopher Xunzi (310–219 BCE) articulated religious ritual as a contributing factor underpinning economic equality and public moral solidarity.³⁹ Xunzi was dissatisfied with the fragmentary presentation of the prevailing Confucian doctrines and sought to systematize all previous teachings of the Confucian schools. He established a comprehensive and inclusive Confucian system with the highest development of the rational doctrine in the pre-Qin age (before 221 BCE).

His pessimistic view of human nature reinforces a necessity of moral duty in terms of conscious exertion, placing great emphasis on ritual/property (*li*) rather than humanness (*ren* according to Confucius) or righteousness (*yi* according to Mencius). Unlike Mencius's idealism and moralism, Xunzi's rationalistic naturalism presents a realistic political vision in his deliberation on Heaven, human nature, morality, education, and ritual. It marked a significant step and his emphasis on education was established as the means for correcting the inherent evil nature of humans.

In the tradition of Confucius and Mencius, Heaven plays an important role in the sense of personal deity, in connection with the practice of offering sacrifice to the Lord on high and to ancestors. However, Xunzi identifies Heaven as Natural Law or the principle of cosmic evolution, which remains constant and aloof in response to human action. In Xunzi's account, humans, born of naturalistic Heaven, are innately inclined to satisfaction of physical desires beyond measure and to competition for gains without limits. Natural desires would cause a way to disorder, poverty, and chaos, without restraining and guiding these properly. But humans have the ability to learn how to be virtuous

³⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 16, 9.

³⁹ Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 39. Xunzi's treatises were compiled and edited by Liu Xiang (77–6 BCE) in the Han period, known as *The Book of Xunzi*.

for transformation. Thus education is of primary importance for ordering the state and changing human nature. This implies that morality is a good in itself as the very essence of humanity.⁴⁰

Self-cultivation, which must be guided by ritual/propriety and faithfulness, entails a multidimensional process controlling the vital breath, nourishing life, cultivating one's character and strengthening one's self. In terms of learning and self-cultivation, a person on the street can become a *yu* (sage-king).⁴¹

By learning and participating in rituals, people can learn to contain their desires (in the case of musical performances, marriage ceremonies, village wine ceremonies, funeral service and mourning rites). Education includes a wide range of social learning and moral training which are enforced by law and guided by moral code. Crucial to this education is the notion of ritual/propriety prescribing correct behavior in all situations. Ritual involves moral emotion and interpersonal and family behavior civilizing humanity's bad nature. The world as lived is encountered and fused in ritual as religious action, which generates new meanings of the new world in that performance action. The religious ritual shapes and conditions the social construction of reality. A positive reception of ritual in the contemporary society enables the sense of community to undergird "the powerful care for the interests of the vulnerable."⁴²

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: CONFUCIAN MORALITY AND CHINESE COLLECTIVISM

In our analysis of public discourse and dimension of Confucianism in social construction of reality, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the relationship between Confucian ethics and Chinese collectivism in the contemporary context. Currently, the Chinese government has driven a market economy and achieved a high level of economic productivity and social wealth. This characterizes China as going through tremen-

⁴⁰ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 470.

⁴¹ Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 80.

⁴² Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 55.

dous changes and undergirding social economic renewal.⁴³ From a political perspective, the Chinese government remarkably began to change the socialist critique of religion as an opiate of the people. Religion is rather appreciated as an instrument of mediating and consolidating the individual, community, and society, because it can serve as a catalyst in constructing spiritual moral civilization, and influencing national unity and foreign relationships.⁴⁴

This political position provides a way for theologians, scholars of social science, and religious pundits in China to deepen and enhance the socio-cultural dimension of religion and its public contribution in the social scientific investigation of relationship between religion and political dynamism. Christian virtue ethics can contribute to undertaking dialogue and collaboration with Confucianism and Chinese socialism. Christian virtue theology shapes the church as a moral community, witnessing to Jesus Christ and influencing people's social, moral life.⁴⁵ In the renewed situation in China, Christian theology faces an important task of retrieving ethical humanism in accordance with biblical prophetic vision and Mencius's politics of rectification.

From the Confucian point of view, Tu Wei-ming insists that Neo-Confucian self-cultivation is embodied in the perfection of the universe as a whole. In the process of moral cultivation, one strives for self-perfection in seeking the unity of all creation. Filial piety underscores social solidarity and political leadership, shaping a Confucian society as a fiduciary community of mutual trust. This community helps people live in peace and mutual support in moral exhortation through cultivating their individual characters.⁴⁶ The Confucian ethic based on duty-consciousness emphasizes social solidarity, eliciting a spirit of collaboration. It comprehends one's role in society in connection with a whole set of social conventions and practices. Consensus formation is undertaken through the participation of a large segment of the group, which is unfolded in a gradual process of mutual consulta-

⁴³ Manhong Melissa Lin, *Ethical Orientation for Christianity in China: The Individual, Community, and Society* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion & Culture, 2010), 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 72–73.

⁴⁶ Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, rev. enl. ed. (New York: SUNY, 1989), 49, 50, 56.

tion.⁴⁷ This perspective reinforces Chinese collectivism in terms of public virtue, trust, and social solidarity.

CONFUCIAN CONTRIBUTION TOWARD CIVIL SOCIETY

A retrieval of Confucian philosophy calls for a daunting hermeneutical task and praxis that aims at actualizing and contextualizing insightful observations about the Confucian living tradition and its modern relevance and renewal. This new development of Confucian theory can be made more effective in the age of pluralism, social disintegration, and conflict.⁴⁸

For this task, I shall examine the ethical-political horizon of Confucian virtues: *ren* (goodness) and *li* (ritual) for modern relevance.

As previously stated, *ren* is the highest ethical term in connection with performative and enactive *li*. *Ren* is of universal character embodied in social and moral life, in juxtaposition with the ritual life. In dialogue with his favorite disciple, Confucius defines the meaning of *ren* in terms of the four words *keji fuli* taken from Analects 12:1. *Keji* refers to self-conquest and goes on to explain *fuli*, the restoration of propriety or ritual law, as a recovery of Confucius's own kind of ritual/propriety (*li*). Confucius places emphasis upon the class-transcending character of *ren* for the sake of establishing a society of ritually adequate propriety. Returning to propriety characterizes the context-sensitive aspect of *ren*. The Confucian notion of *ren* as return to the ritual through mastery of oneself implies that moral authority and freedom are not mutually exclusive. If to be free is to be master of oneself, ritualized society offers a condition for liberation.

Confucianism as a living reality is not a dead past, but gives rise to a living ritual, providing a moral reconsolidation. In the fashion of Emile Durkheim, we may insist that the individual feels overpowered in the ritual by a force, which comes from the collective effervescence. The individual is conveyed into a world, which is different from the world of everyday. In the creative effervescence new ideals can spring up and

⁴⁷ Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1984), 110–111.

⁴⁸ Chung, *The Hermeneutical Self and an Ethical Difference*, 17–18.

new formulations are discovered to serve as a guide to humanity for more solidarity and more justice.⁴⁹

Li may refer to conventional morality (*Sittlichkeit* in Hegelian sense), whereas *ren* implies post-conventional morality based on the universal ethical principle (*Moralität* in Hegelian/Kantian sense). Nonetheless, *ren* is not neatly equated with the Kantian notion of a categorical imperative, because *ren* is conceptualized in a social, interpersonal, and familial context rather than the autonomous and critical reason of the individual. This aspect does not exclude a project of discourse ethics in the fashion of Habermas, which entails a basic orientation for an inter-subjective interpretation of the categorical imperative in light of Hegel's theory of recognition and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) in a given community.⁵⁰

Ren as a socially, interpersonally and cosmically relevant concept articulates that human flourishing can occur in the public realm, if social relations are built upon a proper moral basis. This leads to complementary reciprocity and mutual affection, love, respect, and trust. In the *Classic of Filial Piety for Women* we read the right of woman in correcting the conduct of husband:

The women said, "We dare to ask whether [if] we follow all our husbands' commands we could be called virtuous?" Her Ladyship answered, "What kind of talk is this! . . . If a husband has a remonstrating wife then he won't fall into evil ways. Therefore if a husband transgresses against the Way, you must correct him. How could it be that to obey your husband in everything would make you a virtuous person?"⁵¹

Furthermore, the concept of *ren* does not entirely lose its religious and cosmological dimension. In the context of Neo-Confucianism, the Confucian notion of *ren* is extended to embrace the whole universe, articulating that the principle is one but its manifestations are many (*li yifenshu*). The Neo-Confucian vision is holistic, because self, community, nature, and Heaven are integrated and incorporated with each oth-

⁴⁹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 429–430.

⁵⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 1.

⁵¹ *Classic of Filial Piety*, as cited in Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Confucian Communitarian Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 128.

er in a humanistic-cosmological orientation. For instance, Zhang Zai (1020–1077), normally considered father of Neo-Confucianism, was inspired by the *Book of Changes*. Unity of Heaven and Earth including humanity and the myriad things becomes the cosmological family. This perspective underlines that the principle is one but its manifestations are many. As Zhang Zai states,

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. That which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.⁵²

This holistic vision challenges us to find a concept of civil society in connection with the lives of people, moral system, environment, and religious orientation. A Western notion of civil society, which is based on possessive individualism in the tradition of Hobbes, John Locke, and Adam Smith,⁵³ should be revised and renewed by the Confucian legacy of self, community, and cosmos.

A civil society which is grounded in mutuality and reciprocal exchange keeps at bay configuration of power and dominion by protecting weaker members in the public realm. It encourages everyone to receive education, which helps to fulfill responsibility properly. Moral cultivation is required at all levels of the society. A good society in a democratic and multi-religiously fused context implies that paying attention to the self and the other (mindfulness) calls on all of our resources of intelligence, feeling, and moral sensitivity.⁵⁴

CONFUCIAN PEDAGOGY IN RENEWAL

A good education integrates the past, the present, and the future and it helps learners develop their own pedagogy. In classical Chinese, to be-

⁵² Chan Wing-tsit, *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 497.

⁵³ For the critical study of Western notion of civil society, see Chung, *Church and Ethical Responsibility in the Midst of World-Economy*, 54–64.

⁵⁴ Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 254.

lieve and to be worthy of faith is expressed by the word *xin*, of which the ideogram contains the signs for “person” and “speech.” One believes in a person who is worthy of confidence and in whose word one can trust. Accordingly, sincerity is a manifestation of Nature conferred by Heaven. This ideogram contains the signs for speech and completion. In sincerity, the word and action will be right and intact.⁵⁵

Self-cultivation, seen in the Neo-Confucian context of investigation of worldly affairs and extension of knowledge, broadens and deepens one’s sensitivity and formation without belittling one’s identity in the body, family, community, society, and the world. As Richard Madsen correctly states, the cosmic Principle (*Li*) is an objective reality to which the moral self confirms. However, the Principle cannot be simply known through reason. It has analogical, diverse, pluralist manifestations in the world. One’s moral self, who seeks to apprehend the fundamental Principle, becomes moral while developing in the midst of the world, which is the place for such self-cultivation.⁵⁶ Moral self is in-the-world with the other moral self of which *ren* speaks.

In the pedagogical process of self-cultivation, it is important to develop creative ways for recognizing the diverse manifestations of the Truth, in order to hone pedagogical skill and enhance conversation with Western liberal notions. Moral cultivation has more advanced level than family life, that is, in responsible ethical and political leadership of a gentle person, which requires public institutions, schools, local temples, theatre groups, clan associations, guilds, and a variety of ritual or festival-centered activities. Each citizen has equal right to participate in the polity, education, and dialogue. From an educational horizon public institutions can be a form of civilized societies, which are based on humanistic principles and ethical values rather than driven by the pursuit of power, dominion, and wealth. An advocacy of open discussion of public questions in schools and academies is proposed in order to uphold moral standards against social and political order.

Given this, a Confucian view of moral-cultivation needs to renew itself in adopting a pedagogy from Western scholars’ endeavors in a democratic and religiously diverse society. Conversation with respectful engagement in the pedagogical context helps Confucian ethos to

⁵⁵ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 20.19, in Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. James Legge (New York: Dover, 1971), 413.

⁵⁶ Richard Madsen, “Confucian Conceptions of Civil Society,” in Bell, *Confucian Political Ethics*, 14.

overcome its limitation generally imbued with the teacher as an authoritative figure.

HERMENEUTICAL RETRIEVAL:
VOX DEI AND *VOX POPULI* IN PUBLIC LIFE

The Confucians are action-oriented intellectuals, because their responsibility is immersed in all political, social, and public conflicts of the time. Breaking through conflict, they learn to overcome it by changing the course of society, curbing the exercise of power and dominion through moral commitment. Confucian life-orientation and ethics provide a grammar of action, shaping the habits of the heart of the people in East Asian society.⁵⁷ In academic study of classic literature and sincere participation in family community and public issues, interpretation is open to an ever-evolving consensus through discussion, critique, and renewal among the Confucians. There is ambiguity and plurality in the Confucian interpretation of conflict between the Rationalistic School of Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and the Idealistic School of Wang Yangming (1472–1529).

I seek to achieve hermeneutical retrieval of Mencius's notion of *vox dei* and *vox populi* for the right of the people in public realm, by involving Wang Yangming's position. In the opening statement of *The Great Learning*, we read that the extension of knowledge and the investigation of things is the epitome of the Confucian moral and political program.⁵⁸ The cultivating self is in the midst of the other, the society, and the world. Wang Yangming offers a creative interpretation of investigation of things and extension of knowledge by emphasizing sincerity of intention. Self-cultivation is comprehended as manifesting virtue in relation to the self and loving people in relation to public society. This refers to his notion of the unity between knowledge and action (*zhi xing he yi*). The substance of the mind-and-heart is the princi-

⁵⁷ Tu Wei-ming, "Heart, Human Nature, and Feeling: Implications for the Neo-Confucian Idea of Civil Society," paper presented at the Ethikon Conference, Rodondo Beach, California, July 10–12, 1998, 23, as cited in Madsen, "Confucian Conceptions of Civil Society," 13.

⁵⁸ Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean*, 367–359.

ple of innate, intuitive knowledge (*liang zhi*) underlying the unity between knowledge and action. The subject-matter of *liang zhi* is not confined to the Confucian classics. Rather, the classics are records of the operation of *liang zhi* in past contexts that everyone possesses.

Wang's radical hermeneutics of the subject-matter led him to be socially engaged in the socio-economic time of the middle period of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). There are sprouts of early capitalism in the late Ming period that shape and influence Wang's new perspective. Official corruption, social and moral crisis, economic injustice and burdens on the lives of the people demonstrate the discrepancy between talk and deed, knowledge and action. Mencius's notion of *vox populi* as *vox dei* is revived and reinterpreted, incorporating it into Wang's understanding of *liang zhi* and his solidarity with the rights of the people. Wang's critique of literal and conventional reading of the texts entails a prophetic denouncement of traditional hierarchical authority for the sake of the voice of Dao as infinite Saying through the face of those who are fragile, vulnerable and victimized in public society.

Given this, David Tracy appreciates Wang's Neo-Confucian insight as the cardinal example of a mystical-political model among all religions. Wang's Neo-Confucian philosophy provides an insight into "unit[ing] the mystical concerns of classical Taoism and Chan Buddhism with the ethical-political civic concerns of classical Confucianism."⁵⁹ Tracy argues that there are different construals of the nature of Ultimate Reality as such. A responsibly pluralistic attitude grounded in ethical-political charge and criteria is open to mutual recognition and transformation in attention to the religious other. Against the logic of reductionism and totalization in the study of religion, a heuristic strategy of critical-revisionist hermeneutics adopts a mystical-political model among all the religions, the best example of which is Wang Yang-ming's Neo-Confucian way.

In appreciation of Tracy's evaluation of Wang, I put more emphasis on Mencius-Wang's insight into the relationship between *vox dei* and *vox populi* in advancing a social scientific study of religion, society, and public morality. Religious questions relate to the question on the nature of Infinite Reality, which bespeaks through the life and face of people on the margin for ethical rectification. This perspective complements a sociological-anthropological definition of religion as cul-

⁵⁹ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 102.

tural system, by including social discourse and moral reasoning embedded within the interplay between knowledge, power, and dominion.

A symbolic realism, which defines religion only as a system of symbols, operates in the concept of a general order of existence as articulated in an aura of factuality. This helps human emotion and behavioral motivations to make sense, becoming uniquely realistic.⁶⁰ This symbolic realism in ethnographic writing is relevant to a phenomenology of the “said” of speaking, which tends to reduce social living discourse to the written text and code.⁶¹ Nonetheless, Clifford Geertz does not belittle the verbal linguistic dimension in his careful deliberation of the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Savages build models of reality like the construction of the kaleidoscope, which is called “the science of the concrete.”

Geertz extraordinarily perceives that the savages intellectually represent the clan system in a concrete/metaphorical way, so that the basis of the meaning of the relation between a symbolic structure and its referent entails a verbal linguistic dimension, which opens up a potential of comprehending binary opposition and communication system in connection with the dimension of saying.⁶² This integrative perspective on the said and saying facilitates me to pursue a phenomenology of the saying of Infinite Reality within a social-hermeneutical frame of reference, which advocates for the event of speaking in relation to the “said.” The saying or living discourse is not reduced to the domain of the “said.” It is certain that we write the *noema* of the speaking, that is, thought, content, or gist, but the meaning of the speech event must be further sought in the saying of Infinite Reality through the Other. This perspective makes a symbolic realism more politically and ethically amenable in social-hermeneutical framework, analyzing the formation of social-discourse in the study of religion, society, and symbol.

Significantly, Mencius’s notion of *vox populi* as *vox dei* remains an insight for us to develop a discourse ethics based on the speech and discourse event. As Mencius states,

If the speech is not impartial I can see where lies the speaker’s lopsided view. If it is exaggerated I can see where he loses his footing. If he is deviant I can see where he goes astray. If he is

⁶⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 353–354.

evasive I can see where he is unjustifiable. Those four kinds of speech are all expressions of the mind, which will surely affect politics unfavorably. When embodied in politics, they will surely affect state affairs unfavorably.⁶³

Because the people have the last word in society, an ethics of right discourse in favor of the people remains central. This perspective leads us to evaluate Mencius's significance for peace in terms of deliberation of just war and unjust war for the contemporary world. Confucian prescription on just and unjust war finds a relevance in an anarchical global system, entering into critical dialogue with the traditional Western just war theory.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION: CONFUCIAN CANOPY IN THE AFTERMATH OF COLONIALISM

In our study of Confucian canopy in social construction of reality we have sought to examine the public dimension of Confucianism and evaluate its contribution toward civil society, pedagogy, and democracy in a social-hermeneutical framework. Confucian canopy needs to remain a catalyst in shaping public life and alternative rationality in East Asian context in critical dialogue with the Western notion of modernity imbued with the logic of colonialism and possessive individualism.

As Thomas McCarthy maintains, there is a strong tendency in the most universalistic of early modern philosophers (including Kant) to deal with humanity in terms of a radical dichotomy between us and them, culturally and even racially, say, dichotomy of civilization versus barbarism. The Westerner is taken to be superior, even biologically to all the others. The other races may be capable of learning to be more like Westerners in which Euro-America stands at the apex. Colonialism or Imperialism was justified as educational, bringing the possibility of liberty to those without it. John Stuart Mill, the author of an essay *On Liberty*, spent most of his adult life working for the East India

⁶³ Zhao et al., *Mencius*, 63–64.

⁶⁴ Bell, "Just War and Confucianism," in Bell, *Confucian Political Ethics*, 239.

Company. The greater part of the world has no history, which is the case over the whole East. The despotism of custom is complete. In his philosophy of freedom, Mill justifies despotism as a legitimate mode of government which deals with barbarians, if it provides and affects the end for improvement. British rule in India is good despotism in Mill's terms.⁶⁵

Edward Said's *Orientalism*⁶⁶ marks the discourse of representation in the colonial literature, arguing that how such a dichotomy has dominated Western thought. Given the problems of colonization history in Asia, Walter Benjamin remains an important mentor who denounces the thought of history's countless victims as nothing but stepping stones along the path of development.⁶⁷ As Walter Benjamin insists, even the dead as the colonized, innocent victims will not be safe from the colonizers if the latter win and still rule the history. Nothing that has ever happened in the past should be regarded or sidestepped as lost and forgotten for history and for us.⁶⁸

In the study of the public dimension and discourse of religion it is important to refuse an attempt at homogenizing the Other in light of his/her status of no-history and the process of modernization underlying the logic of colonialism. The recent debate of Axial Age, which characterizes the emergence of several great traditions in the first millennium BCE, demonstrates a need to learn from the wisdom, spirituality, and morality of world religions. The whole East entails a vivid and dramatic history which is not synchronized into the Western notion of history. A construal of global civil society and comparative religious ethics needs to avoid a grand metanarrative of universal history grounded on a cosmopolitan point of view, which would be vulnerable to undergirding the ideological tool of racism, imperialism, and colonialism. A public construal in global and comparative religious relevance must restrain the violence and injustice of the state and global empire toward the lives of people and the environment.

Having said this, a social-hermeneutical strategy of the Confucian canopy in regard to the social construction of reality demonstrates important elements of interpretation and political ethics, especially in the Mencius-Wang tradition, which can be utilized to advance a notion of

⁶⁵ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 168, 172, 180.

⁶⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁶⁷ McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 153.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 246–247.

religious humanism necessary in social scientific study of religion, civil society, and public morality. This perspective facilitates an interpretive reason and ethical humanism in social-hermeneutical frame of reference, say, an archeological re-writing and anamnestic reasoning, which seeks to arouse the spark of hope and resistance in the past as excluded and buried by colonialist historiography and discourse of religion.

In Bellah's account, the hallmark of Confucian utopianism is based on the rule of virtue by ritual, moral example, and rectification in emphatic listening to the voice of the people in the public sphere. It is directed to replacing the rule of war and punishment by establishing and promoting peaceful unification in the world.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it is certain that "a this-worldly transcendentalism" or inner-worldly, yet transcendental-critical morality in Confucian fashion does not necessarily generate social and political consequences. Certainly, Confucian scholars as public intellectuals have contributed to revitalizing the moral order, the communal spirit and purifying the ethos—for example, their commitment to social renewal and change through public duty and political engagement for a utopian horizon of virtue. Confucian canopy in a living tradition becomes a dialogue partner for Christian religion and Chinese collectivism, as driven together in pursuit to articulate their common, but unique horizon and commitment to the good society.

⁶⁹ Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 587, 476, 576. Bellah's argument transcends a limitation of Weber's assumption against a utopian element in Confucianism, which is in sharp contrast to the hope of ancient Israel. Weber, *The Religion of China*, 145.