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**CONFUCIANISM: THE QUESTION OF ITS RELIGIOUSNESS AND
ITS ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING CHINESE SECULAR IDEOLOGY**

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Abstract: Whether Confucianism is a religion or not has been a controversial issue for many years. Recently, along with the “national revitalization” movement in China, Confucianism has been valued and advocated again in China at both official and civil levels. This trend sometimes has been perceived by some observers as a kind of religious revival movement. This paper analysis some key components in the thought of Confucius, such as his idea and attitude towards “Gods”, “Tian” and other divine or supernatural beings, in order to prove that, although Confucius does not exclude religious faith, and has accepted some traditional religious rituals, the basic Confucian doctrines are not constructed on any religious foundation. The essence of Confucianism is humanism and rationalism characterized with the practical reason of “zhongdaology”. It provides a rational base for constructing the secular ideology in ancient China. In today’s Chinese society, Confucianism can still play a role in constructing the modern secular ideology, which may accommodate cultural diversity yet maintain a harmonious social political environment.

Key words: national revitalization, Confucianism, religion, religiousness, secular ideology, zhongdaology, Chinese society, cultural diversity

1. The Question of Religiousness of Confucianism

For more than two thousand years, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology in ancient China. It also has a significant influence on the history and culture of some other Asian countries. But whether Confucianism is a religion has been a controversial issue among scholars for many years (Ren 2000; Zhang 2015). This problem is in itself a product of the collision between Chinese and Western culture, because in ancient China there were not such clear categories as “philosophy”, “religion”, “ethics”, “politics” etc., which were imported to China from the West after the modern time began. It is actually a question of how to view Confucianism or the Chinese cultural tradition in general from the perspective of Western culture.

Confucianism was founded by Confucius in the 6th century B.C.E. It was one of the schools of theories and doctrines appeared during the so called “Spring-Autumn” and “Warring States” periods. But afterwards it has evolved into a complex whole which includes cosmology, moral ideas, values, political principles, state institutions, social norms, customs, rituals as well as personal cultivation, etc. Therefore, it is indeed very difficult to relocate this whole tradition in the modern or the Western academic classification system.

The ideological dominance of Confucianism ended along with the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty of China Empire. Afterwards, Confucianism not only lost its appropriate location in the modern Chinese social and intellectual frameworks, but also frequently become the scapegoat for any possible shortages and defects of Chinese culture, and has been denounced and criticized by different kinds of modern revolutionaries. However, along with the revolutionary criticism to the Confucian tradition, there have also been some different forms of Confucian revival movements advocated by cultural conservatives. One of these efforts is to convert Confucianism into a real religion, in order to secure Confucianism a position in the modern society at least equal to that of Buddhism, Christianity or Islamism etc. For instance, around the end of 19th century and the early twentieth century, cultural conservatives represented by Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Chen Huangzhang (1880-1933) had made great efforts seeking to establish Confucianism as China’s real national religion (Chen His-yuan 1999; Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 94; Murray 2009, 372; Chen Yong 2013, 48-52; Zhang 2015, 98). Similar endeavors of converting Confucianism into certain kind of real religion or quasi-religion have also been observed in Korea and Japan (Don 2013; Paramore 2015).

Actually, as early as in the 16th and 18th centuries, the Western Christian missionaries in China were already perplexed by the religious-

ness issue of Confucianism, and has triggered many disputes on the complicated Confucian rituals and certain confusing concepts and ideas recorded in classic Confucian texts (Zhang 2005, 146-159). Some Jesuits like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) did not admit Confucianism as a religion thus to illustrate that the Confucian rituals are compatible with Catholicism. While other Jesuits confirm Confucian rituals are religious thus to affirm Confucianism as paganism and heresy. In today's World, Confucianism is often introduced by foreign scholars as a "world religion" (Taylor 2004), similar to Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Islamism etc. Confucius himself is frequently mentioned together with Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad as "religious Founders". (Freeman and McClymond 2001). However, there are also some different opinions. For instance, Heiner Roetz clearly opposes the religious interpretation of Confucianism (Roetz 2008, 368-370). Mary Evelyn Tucker thinks that although Confucianism does not fit easily into Western theological categories, and the theological language and terms such as "transcendence" and "immanence" are inadequate to describe fully the religious dimensions of Confucianism, yet it still contains certain religious dimensions such as in the interaction of cosmology and cultivation (Tucker 1998, 5). Herbert Fingarette considers Confucius as the "secular" yet "sacred" (Fingarette 1972). David Hall and Roger Ames think that, although different from the religions in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which takes the form of an individual bonding with God, Confucianism "accomplishes the same project of bonding by achieving a quality of integration in the world which dissolves the distinction between part and whole", so it can still be considered a different kind of religion (Hall and Ames 1987, 243).

In the 1950s-60s, some oversea New-Confucians specially emphasize the religious dimension of Confucianism and the "religious significance of Chinese culture", in order to contend against the influence of the Western Christian Tradition (Zhang 2015, 99). But even among these "New Confucians", there were also different views. For instance, Zhang Junmai (1887-1969), one of the representatives of the "New Confucius" denies religious reading of Confucianism, considering the religious reading merely a misunderstanding of Chinese culture and Confucianism by Western scholars (Zhang 1957, 7-9).

Contemporary Chinese scholars of different disciplines approaches Confucianism from different angles, yet their opinions are inconsistent on the issue of Confucian religiousness (Ren 2000). Many of the mainstream Chinese scholars do not consider Confucianism as a religion, they think that Confucianism is a philosophy rather than a religion; Confucian rituals are mainly aesthetic and artistic rather than religious. Yet there are also quite some scholars who believe Confucianism is a religion with its unique forms, and it was the most influential religion in Chinese history (Miao & Chen 1999). Others agree that in Confucian doctrines there may be certain religious dimension which is specially obvious in certain classic Confucian

texts such as the *Zhongyong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), as pointed out by Tu Weiming (Tu 2008, 118-156).

The issue of the religiousness of Confucianism has attracted wide attention in recent years again. After the past several decades of “Reform and Opening-up” and the rapid economic development, China has achieved great success and return to the international stage as a world power. At the same time Confucianism seems has also come back again in different forms and levels along with the upsurge of nationalist enthusiasm. For instance, the current Communist Party leader Xi Jinping visited Confucius’ family mansion in Qufu, the Confucius home town, shortly after he was elected as the President of China. Afterwards, he also attended a grand international symposium on the commemoration of the 2565th anniversary of the birth of Confucius held in Beijing. It is the first time for a supreme leader of the Party and the state to attend such an event ever since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. This cannot help but reminiscent of those ancient Chinese emperors who usually had to pay their respect to Confucius by holding certain rituals after they have been crowned. Meanwhile, reading and study of Confucian classics has become more and more popular in China today. This is not only due to the promoting by officials and scholars, in many cases it is spontaneously initiated from the grassroots-levels. Some cultural conservative scholars also suggest projects to make Confucianism a real “state religion” or “civic religion” (Paramore 2015; Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 103-104). Fieldwork studies have found certain grassroots-level religious “Confucian congregation” in South-East rural areas in China today (Chen and Fan, 2017). Although the religious initiatives are neither accepted by mainstream intellectuals, nor encouraged by government authorities, they have the tendency of becoming popular and even seem to get certain international influence. In the eyes of some oversea observers, the current renewed emphasizing on Confucianism is easily confused with, or misunderstood as a kind of a movement of religious revival of Confucian tradition. After observing some individual cases of the events of commemorating Confucius in China today, some scholars think that Confucianism has not just been regarded as a world religion by Western scholars, but also functions as a religion for many in China today (Sun, 2013, 153-172). Therefore, it is necessary and also interesting to re-examine the issue of religiousness of Confucianism.

2. Confucius’s Attitude towards Deity and Supernatural beings

Etymologically, the word “religion” emphasizes “respect for what is sacred, reverence for the gods”, “obligation, the bond between man and the gods.” (Wikipedia contributors 2018) According to the contemporary anthropologists’ overview of religion in cross-cultural perspective, a

religion must have the following components: (1) Beliefs about supernatural beings, such as “God” or “gods”, or any other supernatural powers; (2) Myths and the world views based on its mythology; (3) Rituals and symbols, i.e., organized performance of behaviors with symbolic significance intended to influence spiritual powers (Peoples and Bailey 2003, 273-275). The first one, i.e., the beliefs about supernatural beings, is the key element of all religions. Using these criteria, we can try to make an assessment of Confucianism to see if it is qualified to be called a religion or not.

It is true that, there are quite some important names, such as “Shangdi上帝 (above ruler, God)”, “Shen神 (god, deity, spirit)”, “Tian天 (Heaven)”, “gui鬼 (ghost)” etc., which can be identified as referring to the supreme holy divine beings or other supernatural beings in the early Confucian classics. These Classics, namely, *Shi* 诗 (*The Book of Songs*), *Shu* 书 (*The Book of Documents*), *Li* 礼 (*The Book of Rituals*), etc., were used by Confucius as the basic teaching materials and thus handed down to later generations. However, these classics were not created by Confucius himself. As he once said: “I transmit but do not innovate.” (*Analects* 7:1) The religious idea appeared in these classics reflects only the general religious background of the times before and when Confucius lived, rather than Confucius’ own idea. Contrastingly, in the *Analects*, the most reliable records of Confucius’ own speeches, we can find that Confucius was not as religious as his contemporaries, and there is even certain dereligionizing tendency in Confucius’ thought.

Actually, in the *Analects*, Confucius has never mentioned the word “Shangdi上帝 (the above ruler, God), which is frequently appeared in other early classics. He is reluctant to talk about gods and any other prodigious things (*Analects* 7:21), and his attitude towards “Tian (Heaven), Shen (god), Gui (ghost) and afterlife, etc., is quite equivocal. On the one hand, he once praised the ancient sage king for eating and drinking meanest fare while making offerings to ghost and gods (*Analects* 8:21), and asked his disciples to be serious in those sacrifice ceremonies as if gods were really in front of them (*Analects* 3:12). On the other hand, he had seldom talked about gods, ghosts or afterlife, etc., advocating “to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence” (*Analects* 6:22). When his disciples inquire him about how to serve the gods and ghosts and how to understand death and afterlife, he answered: “You are not able even to serve people, how can you serve the ghosts?” “You do not understand even life, how can you understand death and afterlife?” (*Analects* 11:12). In general Confucius’ thought is mainly focused on secular affairs in this realistic world, rather than on Gods or the transcendent other world.

Confucius’ attitude towards “Tian天”, which has both the meanings of Heaven and sky in ancient Chinese, is also complicated and ambiguous.

It is recorded in the *Analects* that in several times when Confucius was under very difficult or embarrassed situations, he awedly referred “*Tian*” as the ultimate resource to emphasize his emotional expressions, such as “If I have done anything improper, may *Tian*’s curse be on me, may *Tian*’s curse to be on me!” (*Analects* 6:28) “Alas! *Tian* has bereft me! *Tian* has bereft me!” (*Analects* 11:9) But these exclamatory expressions have no more meaning than nowadays saying “Oh, my God!” “God help me!” in daily language. Actually Confucius seldom talks about “*Tian*” seriously, as one of his disciples said: we can hardly hear our Master talking about the Way of *Tian* (*Analects* 5:13). There is only once in the *Analects* when Confucius mentioned “*Tian*” seriously, he said: “What does *Tian* ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are hundred things coming into being. What does *Tian* ever say?” (*Analects* 17:19). Obviously, different from some of his contemporary thinkers such as Mo Zi, who believed “*Tian*” as a divine person with intention, Confucius seemly views “*Tian*” as only an objective natural law. As Hall and Ames point out, the ancient Chinese concept “*Tian*” may has some religious significance, but it is not a personal deity. “*Tian*” also means “sky”, it can be viewed as a non-personal natural force outside human world (Hall and Ames 1987, 202-203). Other Chinese scholars think that “*Tian*” may even include elements such as “social environment”, “social conditions” and “social power”. Although these elements are originally belong to human beings, they are objective and beyond the control of any specific individual. Heiner Roetz points out: “Ancient Confucianism did not inherit the religion of ‘Heaven’ as much but only its normative content—the primacy of morals—and that it advocated a basically areligious ethics of self-cultivation based on individual self-respect.” (Roetz, 2008, 369)

The worship for Gods, ghosts and Heaven, and the relevant religious practices had existed before Confucius for a long history, and had composed the general cultural and ideological background for the creation of Confucianism. Therefore, it is not surprising that Confucius shares some basic theological and religious ideas with his contemporaries. However, those religious background, including the relevant mythology and religious practice (such as ancestor worship and sacrifice ceremony, etc.) were not created or innovated by Confucius himself. Confucius has only partially accepted some elements from the old religious tradition for educational, ethical and social-political purposes. Sometimes he gives “rationalized” explanation to the old religious myths; sometimes he makes pragmatic usage of the traditional religious rituals. In fact, Confucius can even be called a killer of ancient religious mythology, he has modified some ancient myths with realistic and rational thinking, thus reduced the theological characteristic of these myths (Guo 1998, 25-26). Therefore, Confucius cannot be considered a “founder of a religion”. In fact, many researchers even think that Confucius is likely to be an atheist. Although Confucianism attached great importance to those quasi-religious cere-

monies contained in the complicated “li” rituals, his purpose is very realistic and pragmatic, that is to strengthen the authority of his Dao in order to educate the people. He put more emphasis on the aesthetic and ethical significance embodied in these rituals. As some scholars have pointed out: Confucius did not break through with traditional religion, but he made some rational and humanistic interpretation of traditional religion, take some practical usage of religious rituals, as a result, he transformed traditional religion into a part of his theory (Mou and Zhang 2000, 169-173).

In general, due to Confucius’s ambiguous attitude on the issues concerning god, deity and the afterlife, etc., and his utilitarian usage of those quasi-religious forms, Confucianism cannot be considered a real religion. However, Confucius has never clearly excluded the possibility of the existence of deities. He seems to have reserved a possible path of innermost spiritual transcendence for individuals. And in some early Confucian texts, such as in the *Zhongyong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*), as Tu Weiming has pointed out, there does have a kind of religious dimension (Tu 2008, 118-156). Therefore, some scholars think that even Confucius can be considered an atheist, Confucianism may still be viewed as a kind of religion because Confucian “moral standards are dependent on something outside of us, something bigger than human nature—or culture—that is much more than a human or even a rational construction”, and “the sense of awe Confucius experiences in contemplating *Tian* meets this basic description of religious experience.” (Louden 2002, 81) Notwithstanding the absence of a clear external transcendent divinity of God, other scholars try to testify the religiousness of Confucianism from the angle of internal or immanent transcendence. This concept was first produced by some of the modern New-Confucians to distinguish the unique spirit of Chinese culture from the Western religious culture (Tang 1974, 338; Mou 1974, 30-31; Guo 1999). Afterwards this concept has been widely used by many scholars in China and abroad. Some scholars think this “internal transcendence” can still be accommodated as a special kind of religion, because Confucius “encounters the divine fundamentally in the project of moral self-cultivation rather than as a transcendent other.” (Connell 2009, 148) If such notion is acceptable, Confucianism can only at most be regarded as an alternative kind of religion. It does not conform to the standard definition of religion made by religious anthropologists. Actually, just as some scholars has pointed out, it is unnecessary to cite the religiousness of Confucianism in defense of Confucian values. Confucian ethic and social values can well be explained in a rational and recognizable logic (Ren 2012).

3. Confucian Practical Reason and its Role in Constructing Secular Ideology

Although Confucius seems never clearly excluding the existence of deity and divinity, it is questionable to call Confucius a theist. At least his doctrines of ethics and politics are definitely not constructed mainly on a theological foundation. However, many foreign scholars of Confucianism often pay more attention to the visible superficial forms and expressions of Confucianism, such as the practice of various rituals, the way of self-cultivation, filial piety and other specific moral rules, etc., thus incline to consider that religious element plays a greater role in Confucianism and neglect its philosophical connotations. (Zhang 2011, 24) But this religious understanding has in a certain degree shaded the rational and logic root of Confucian philosophy underneath these superficial forms and expressions. In the past decades, along with the rapid socioeconomic development and the modernization in China and some Southeast Asian regions, Confucianism as one of the most influential cultural heritages of these regions has attracted more attention from scholars all over the world. However, viewing Confucianism only as a kind of religion or merely a religious tradition of particular regions, may close over the serious philosophical significance of the study of Confucianism may contribute to the common knowledge of rationality of human kind.

Different from other scholars who view Confucianism as a religious tradition, Heiner Roetz considers Confucianism mainly as “a non-conformist and basically secular ethics” which construct morality “by natural reason alone, without religious revelation and ecclesiastical tutelage” (Roetz, 2008, 368) Other scholars also point out that “the contact of European philosophy with Chinese thought in the second half of the 17th and 18th century influenced the rise and development of secularism, which became a distinctive feature of the Western Enlightenment”, since “Confucian ethics has questioned biblical chronology and undermined faith as a necessary condition of morality” (Rogacz, 2018, 68).

From our point of view, the basic Confucian doctrines are mainly based on the logic of its practical reason rather than based on some religious beliefs. Confucianism not only represented the newly arising humanistic and rationalist trend of the later Spring-Autumn and the Warring State period, but also provides a rational philosophical foundation for constructing the secular ideology in Chinese society afterwards without much religious endorsement. The ideology of modern Western secular society is also mainly based on rationalism. But the Western rationalism has its own ontological origin, and it is characterized by individualism and liberalism. Comparatively, ancient Chinese philosophy lacks of such ontological background and individualist tradition. Therefore, the Confucian rationalism is different from the modern Western rationalism in many aspects. Yet the rationalist essence of Confucianism should not be

neglected or be closed over by the obsessive attention to its superficial religious or quasi-religious forms.

The core of Confucian rationalism is the Way of *Zhong*, or “Zhongdaology”. It is a practical reason characterized by the very important concept of “*Zhong*”. The Chinese character of “*zhong*中” has the meaning of interior, centrality, between, middle, right, appropriateness, to the point, neither excessiveness nor insufficiency, etc. According to both the extant transmitted ancient texts and the newly excavated bamboo slips manuscripts, searching for “*zhong*” and adhering on “*zhong*” is an important political heritage imparted among the early ancient Chinese “Sage Kings” from generation to generation (Xu 2012, 423-424). Being able to adhering on the principle of “*zhong*” can even be considered a condition of the legitimacy of the sovereign. Afterwards, this idea has been developed by Confucius and his followers into a special Confucian way of thinking, that can be called “zhongdaology”.

Different from the Western traditional ontological philosophy, the Confucian philosophy concentrates more on the quest for the appropriate, suitable, contextual and timely correct degree of “*zhong*” between or among different things, rather than seeking for the static, permanent or ontic “being” of thing-in-itself. It focuses on the “betweenness” and even the “emptiness”, pays more attention to the relationship and correlativeness of things, and tries to realize a balanced and harmonious state of “*zhong*” in order to maintain the co-existence and mutualistic symbiosis of different factors or things. As a philosophical concept, “*zhong*” does not refer to any substantial “being”, yet it exists constantly and dynamically in different forms everywhere. It is not a “being” itself, but it depends on other “beings” to form itself. It mediates and moderates different ideas, yet it is also sustained by different and even opposing ideas. It always dwells at the center, yet its centrality is supported by the surrounding of those at the edge or margin. It represents a moderate and proper degree, yet this degree is referencing to various different and even extreme parameters. It is not a kind of pure knowledge, yet it is relying on all available knowledge. It is a principle that should be conformed to, yet itself is dynamic and will advance with the time.

According to Confucianism, the principle of “*zhong*”, rather than any other ontological truth or religious beliefs, should be the fundamental guidance for people’s social life, including morality and politics. Most of the important Confucian ideas can be explained with the logic of zhongdaology. For instance, “*ren* 仁 (benevolence, love or humanity)”, the highest virtue in Confucian ethics, can be understood as a “*zhong*”, or the constant and mutual depending relationship between self and others. “*Yi* 义 (righteousness, justice)” can be understood as the appropriate, suitable and balanced disposition of human social relations. “*Li* 礼 (rituals, rites, etiquette)” can be understood as the tools to moderate people’s desire and

behavior to the suitable degree in order to realize the appropriate social order.

This philosophy of zhongdaoology indicates that, even if without ultimate religious beliefs or ontological knowledge of the absolute “truth”, human beings can still use their intellect and reason to make appropriate choices and correct decisions if they truly follow the principle of “zhong”. This is because our human beings are historical existence and are always living in particular time and space. Yet we can make the right and appropriate choices under the given situations if we use our intellect and reason correctly. And the right and appropriate choices are usually a choice of “zhong”, i.e., a choice that coordinates different ideas and moderates extreme positions, a choice that is realistic, practical and applicable at the given situations, and a choice that will never betray our innermost human nature and desire.

This Confucian idea of “zhong” represents the wisdom of practical reason and provides a rational base for secular ideology in ancient Chinese society. The position of the secular political authority in ancient China is always higher than any religious authority, because the political authority, namely, the centralized imperial power, is nominally representing the “Way of Zhong”. That is why the highest political authority, namely “*huang ji* 皇极”, or the “supreme royal excellency”, is commonly interpreted by ancient Confucian scholars as the “greatest zhong (大中)” (Kong 1980, 189-190). This authority established on the Confucian idea of “zhong” is not at all a religious authority. And it is just for this reason, it has no conflict with any religious beliefs, so long as the religious authorities do not intent to challenge or undermine the imperial secular political authority.

Actually in ancient China there have always been many kinds of religions. China has its native religions such as Taoism and variety of folk cults and local gods worships. Since the Han Dynasty (206 b.c.e—220 a.d.), the Buddhism with many of its different denominations were also introduced into China and began prevailing. Christianity and Muslim also came to China very early. Nestorianism, one branch of the early Christianity, become prevalent in China as early as in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 a.d.) But generally speaking, during the long history of China, under the ruling of the secular imperial authority, these religions co-existed without major religious conflict with each other. People with different religion beliefs usually can co-exist peacefully.

There are usually no sharp conflicts between the dominant Confucian ideology, the imperial secular authority, and the variety of religions. The only few clashes happened between imperial power and certain religion are usually due to economic or political reasons, rather than triggered by religious dispute (Mou 2000, 455-460). In fact, many ancient Chinese emperors themselves are devout Taoist or Buddhist believers. One typical case is the Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, who had even donated his own life to a Buddhist temple for several times during his regime (Yao

1973, 1-102), yet this does not prevent him from governing the state with Confucian ideas. And in the near modern time, some Confucian scholars were not difficult to be converted into Christian. One of these cases is Wu Leichuan (1870-1944), who was a famous Confucian scholar in the later Qing Dynasty. He had received the traditional Confucian education all his life, but was eventually baptized in the Episcopal Church and become a Christian. He is the pioneer of the Chinese domestic Christian theology, yet his thought of Christian has integrated some of the Confucian doctrines, providing a good case of interaction between Christianity and Confucianism in early 20th China (Kang 2016).

Even to the modern time, we still can find that in some remote small country towns with only several thousand residents, mosques, Buddhist and Taoist temples and even Christian churches, can co-exist in peace with each other. For instance, there is a remote small village town named Qing Yan in the southwest Guizhou province, where there are only a few thousands of residents. However, in such a small town, there are three Buddhist temples, one Taoist temple, one Christian Church, one Catholic Church, one temple for the cult of Zhao Gong (the god of wealth), one temple for the cult of Wen Chang (the God of literature), one Confucius temple, as well as two small Museum of Communist revolutionary pioneers. This small town can be considered as a vivid epitome of the Confucian idea of “being harmony but not monotony”. Among these religions, there is difference but no hostility. For ordinary Chinese people, different religions are like different super markets, they just provide alternative choice for spiritual products.

Of course, when the exotic religions came into China, they usually have to make certain compromise in order to be compatible with the dominant Confucian ideology and the Chinese secular social order. But compromise and compatibility are always a bidirectional process of adapting and adopting. And this is just one of the essential meanings of “zhongdaology”, since “zhong” is in itself a result of mediating and coordinating different ideas. Actually in the long history, Confucianism always tries to find the compatibility with other cultures and seeks for the possibility of co-existence with others. Its practical and realistic rationality enables it to be apt to absorb, adopt the elements from other cultures to enrich and to enlarge its own connotations and capacity.

To sum up, Confucianism has its own ethic values and beliefs, sometimes even with certain transcendental and quasi-religious dimension. But Confucianism in general is not a missionary religion; it does not seek conversion of others. Unlike some deontological or categorical ethics based on religious beliefs, Confucian ethics does not adhere on any fixed, absolute supreme principles, except the principle of “zhong”, which in itself is depending, flexible and dynamic. This characteristic enables Confucianism to take a tolerant and open mind to the values and believes of different religions and cultures. Under the principle of “zhong”, different

cultures or religions can find their own position in a society and coexist together in harmony. The “all-or-nothing” choice is not necessary. As a secular ideology, Confucianism takes the general welfare of human beings, the overall peace and harmony of human society in the realistic world as its highest goal, yet it does not oppose or exclude anyone or any religion that are pursuing their own spiritual or transcendental goals beyond this realistic world. Therefore, there is no reason for Confucianism to conflict or clash with other civilizations only for religious reasons. The war waged for pure religious reason such as the Crusades has never appeared in China.

4. The Prospect of Confucianism in Contemporary Society

Currently we have reasons to believe that Confucianism will play a more important role in the modern social and cultural development in China. It will constitute one of the characteristics of the “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. This is determined by the long history of the cultural tradition of China. It is also because that, although Confucianism was rooted in the soil of a pre-modern agricultural society, its characteristics of practical reason and secular ideology make it generally acceptable in a modern society and compatible with the secular-rational values, since rationalism and secularism are the basic features of modernity. Scholars are divergent on issues concerning the relationship between Confucianism and some modern values such democracy, free market economy, etc. But quite some studies indicate that the basic Confucian values may not have any conflict with those modern values. Confucian idea of “people oriented governance” may be well compatible with the value of democracy (Xu 2006, 138-140). And there is also no conflict between Confucianism with free market economy, as Daniel Bell has pointed out: “Unlike Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, there has never been an organized Confucian resistance to economic modernization.” (Bell, 2008, 220)

Meantime, the Confucian areligious and equivocal attitude towards deities and supernatural beings determines that Confucianism cannot develop into a real religion. Therefore, even though Confucianism now is highly recognized and valued again in today’s China, it is not likely that this will evolve into a religious revival movement, and China is not likely to become a country of unity of government and religion, like some Middle East Islamic countries. It is true that in old China, Confucian temples enshrined with the sculptural images of Confucius and his disciples and later followers could be found all over China, and certain rituals of sacrifices similar to that happened in Buddhist or Taoist temples were held in these temples regularly (Wilson 2002; Murray 2009). This gives outside observers an intuitive impression that Confucianism is a

kind of religion. But actually without a solid base of believe of divinity, these rituals have quite different meanings comparing to a real religious rituals. It is more like a memorial meeting showing respect to those great figures or eminent persons in history. In recent years this kind of rituals have been restored in Confucian temples in some local areas, even supported by local government and attended by some Communist Party leaders. This is precisely indicating that at least in the eyes of Chinese people today, these rituals in Confucian temple are not categorized as religion, since according to the Party discipline, Communist officials are not allowed to attend any real religious activity. And Confucianism has never registered in China's official administration department for religious affairs as a religion. Actually this kind of commemorative activities hold in memory of Confucius and other ancient heroes or celebrities in China today are more like American people's commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. or Abraham Lincoln, etc. Even some rituals similar to that of certain religion, there is no substantial religious base underneath these rituals or events. As for the individual case of self-organized religion under the name of Confucianism found by some scholars in some remote local communities (Chen and Fan 2017), it is mainly a kind of folk religions or cults hiding in Confucian clothing in order to acquire a legitimate status to shield its essence of superstition. It is neither popular among mainstream society nor encouraged by authorities. Actually it is even "illegal" according to the current Chinese administrative laws and regulations.

Some scholars suggest that if Confucianism can make significant contributions to contemporary politics and political institutions, it should satisfy two conditions, namely: "the liberal accommodation condition", i.e., it must be able to tolerate or accommodate diversity; and "the intelligibility condition", i.e., it must have an intelligible or recognizable Confucian character. (Kim 2016, 45; Mang 2018, 30) If we truly understand the core logic of Confucianism, we will say that Confucian meta-ethics and meta-politics, namely, the *zhongdaology*, can satisfy these two conditions without any contradiction. One essential meaning of the Way of Zhong or *zhongdaology* is to inclusively considering diversified elements and to find a balanced and appropriate solution. This solution is called "*zhong*". The purpose of "*zhong*" is not to exclude or diminish diversity, rather, it is to reach the harmony in which diversified elements can co-exist peacefully. This is called "*he er bu tong* 和而不同 (being harmony but not monotony)". Perhaps one of the prominent manifesting of the "being harmony but not monotony" is the peaceful co-existence of different religious in Chinese society. Therefore, there is no problem for Confucianism to meet the requirement of "the liberal accommodation condition". Meantime, the idea of "*zhong*" is typically Confucian; it is not based on any mysterious or theological beliefs but on intelligible and recognizable Confucian practical reason. It is also because of this, Confucianism has no tendency of abso-

lutism, dogmatism, and will not likely leads to extremism or paranoidism. It can be helpful in mediating human relations and solving social contradictions, thus to accommodate cultural diversity yet to maintain a harmonious social political environment. Therefore, we think that Confucianism still can play a positive role in constructing the secular ideology in a modern society.

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