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A Misguided Form of Holism and Ultimate Concern - the Re-institutionalization of
Confucianism

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Abstract: It is impossible to determine the correct method to re-institutionalize Confucianism without a solid historical and philosophical analysis of the process of China's modernization after the 1840s. This process bears a striking resemblance to the rising of Neo-Confucianism in medieval China. A misguided form of holism, based on the *Great Learning*, could explain both the proceedings and the failures of these two historical events. Inspired by Paul Tillich's conception of religion as ultimate concern and the Protestant model of the principle of separation of church and state, this paper concludes that the institutional basis of contemporary Confucianism ought to embody this principle in order to realize a healthier form of revival.

Key Words: China's modernization, the rising of Neo-Confucianism, a misguided form of holism, ultimate concern, separation of church and state.

Although it is not unusual for contemporary religious scholars to categorize Confucianism as a world religion, it is a bit awkward for ordinary people to feel affiliated with this tradition due to its still noticeable under-institutionalization. However, a strong reviving impulse of Confucianism, together with the rising of China as a new world power, is indeed impressive. In combination of the pro. and con. of this same historical event, we can describe the current religious situation of Confucianism as such: the “haunting ghost” of Confucianism (Yu 1996: 162), which was created during the dissolution of traditional Confucian institutions in modern China, is now full of matter-energy (qi, 氣) yet to find a venue to be fully reincarnated. This situation is not least exacerbated by the fact that Confucianism traditionally never took Christian-like churches or Buddhist-like monasteries which are sometimes completely separated from the secular world as its institutional bases. Alternatively, family, school and government all seem to

be nothing but secular. They were, however, glorified by Confucians as the most important places to fulfill their religious calling: to help Heaven and Earth to nurture a myriad of things under Heaven¹.

Therefore, what is the correct way to re-institutionalize Confucianism? How can we appropriately flesh out the reviving impulse of Confucianism in order to enhance, rather than to vitiate, the basic commitment of democratic polity to religious freedom, tolerance, pluralism and universal human commonwealth?

In order to answer these questions, this paper will not investigate the various experiments that contemporary Confucians are pursuing either in China or overseas. Neither will I examine scholarly theories that attempt to understand Confucianism's relationship to contemporary global politics. In my view, it is impossible to address the aforementioned issues without a solid historical and philosophical analysis of China's radical modernization process from the 1840s to the 1970s vis-à-vis the simultaneous de-institutionalization of Confucianism as the mainstream intellectual tradition of pre-modern China. Accordingly, I intend to, through this kind of analysis, to focus on what I think is the weakest point of Confucianism as a holistic program adopted by traditional Chinese literati to fulfill their religious, ethical and political concerns. In order to find a much healthier body for the reincarnation of Confucianism, we need to address this weak point through a creative interpretation of traditional Confucian classics and a corresponding explorative practice; otherwise, the re-institutionalization of Confucianism will simply repeat the same mistake which has led to at least two huge failures.

1 The Radical Modernization of China

¹ A classical expression of this Confucian religiosity could be found in Chapter 22 of the *Centrality and Commonality* 中庸, in Chan 1963a: 107-108.

From the 1840s to the 1970s, there are roughly three phases of China's modernization: technological, institutional and cultural². They all share the same goal: to save China from her national crisis which was triggered by aggressive Western powers. Accordingly, each phase was launched by its supporters because they thought their predecessors had failed to achieve this goal. Altogether, the unfolding of these phases yields a deep and distinctive rationale for China's modernization: this is a process of internalization, idealization and radicalization.

The first phase, the Self-Strengthening Movement (1860-1894), was technological. As evidenced by its slogans, "Chinese learning for essential principles, Western learning for practical application" (Grasso, Corrin and Kort 2009: 49) and "Learning from the barbarians to deal with the barbarians" (Fung 2010: 4), this movement prioritized the acquisition of Western arms and technologies as the method of modernization in order to maintain the intactness of traditional Confucian ideology and institutions. It ended with the defeat of Qing dynasty (1644-1912) in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895)³.

The institutional phase of China's modernization lasted from 1895-1927. The Hundred Day's Reform (1895) and the New Administration of the post-Boxer decade (after 1900) tried to adapt the old Chinese imperial system into a British-style constitutional monarchy in a way of progressive reformation. The former was thwarted by the conservative power in the royal court, while the launch of the latter was too late to resolve the problems that had been forming for centuries. In contrast, the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 led by Sun Yat-sen intended to establish a French-style republic through violent revolution. Although it succeeded in overthrowing the

² Similar ways to periodize the Chinese modernization can be found in Yu 1994a: 194-197; Yu, 2004: 159 ; Fung 2010: 4; Shih, 2010: 98.

³ Details of the historical events mentioned in this section, especially the first two phases of China's modernization, could be found in Grasso, Corrin and Kort 2009. My narrative of these events in relation to the topic of this paper is a syncretical one based upon multiple resources listed in the references, including Dirlik 2005, Fung 2010, Grasso 2009, Lin 1979, Meisner 1982, Shih 2010, Yu 1994a, 1994b, 1996, 2004a.

Qing dynasty and ended China's millennia-long imperial epoch, the revolutionaries lost their power and China experienced afterwards an extremely tumultuous warlord period. Even if the revolutionaries regained their power and established the Nanjing National government (1927) by defeating most of the warlords during the Northern Expedition (1926-28) led by Chiang Kai-shek, the polity was a party-state system following the example of Soviet Union, far away from its original idea.

The New Cultural Movement, began in approximately 1919, the year of the May Fourth Movement, and initiated the third and last phase of China's modernization: cultural. Proponents of the New Cultural Movement claimed that neither the technological nor the institutional modernization would be effective unless it were grounded in the transformation of ideas at the individual level. Because culture was taken to be the greatest influence upon the human mind, active intellectuals in this phase strived for selecting and promoting the most advanced elements, the most modern idea, from western culture to mold and shape the soul of ordinary Chinese people. Usually, this purportedly enlightening process was premised upon radical antagonism against traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism⁴.

In this cultural phase three intellectual trends can be distinguished: liberalism, cultural conservatism, and socialism. Liberalists were convinced that democracy and science are the most modern ideas in the West. They were typified by a radical anti-traditional belief that these modernest ideas could be gradually imprinted into the Chinese zeitgeist only after the traditional one had been wiped out. (See Fung 2010: 145-158.) Cultural conservatives felt the same urgency to improve traditional Chinese culture. But in contrast, they didn't think Westernization subsumes modernization. Some values present in Chinese culture were considered universal and

⁴ Analyses of the idealization and radicalization of the New Cultural Movement and its influence in the modern intellectual history of China could be found in Fung 2010: 37-57; Lin 1979: 17-40; Yu 1994a: 188-222 ; Yu 1994b: 125-150; Yu 2004: 165-166.

eternal; thus, they maintained that China's modernization ought to cautiously learn from the West and innovatively preserve the Eastern culture (see Fung 2010: 62-127).

Comparatively, most Chinese socialists were much less patient. However, there were two kinds of socialists before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In general, they both agreed the most modern idea in the West was socialism. Democracy and science would not function well if they were engrafted on the capitalist system. Yet, the non-Marxist reformative socialists asserted that socialist policies ought to be introduced into the capitalist system gradually. China can strengthen thereby its economic power without being trapped in the same predicaments of Western countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries because of their uncontrolled capitalism. (See Fung 2010: 200-255.) In contrast, the Marxist revolutionary socialists believed that Communism will and ought to be the consummation of human history towards which all societies are oriented. Accordingly, China ought to rely upon the revolutionary power of the masses to achieve this outcome under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

This bifurcation among Chinese socialists also reminds us that the cultural phase of China's modernization can be divided into two sub-phases. From 1919-1949, none of these three trends was dominant. They competed and meanwhile intermingled with each other. An intellectual could be politically liberal, culturally conservative, while simultaneously sympathized with socialist ideas (see Fung 2010: 16). However, after 1949, the Marxist revolutionary socialism, with Maoism as its culminated form, overwhelmed all the others.

In my view, the crystallization of China's modernization from the 1840s to the 1970s into Maoist Marxism as its intellectual kernel is characteristic of the whole process. Maoist Marxism is a theory of holism. It categorizes human history into one scheme, uniformly depicts the

historical and national identity of early modern China, and provides a package of policies purported to resolve the most fundamental issues of Chinese society to realize its ultimate transformation. Because of this holistic approach, it is radically antagonistic towards both traditional Chinese culture and any element of western culture other than their version of socialism. (See Dirlik 2005: 47; Fung 2010: 262; Lin 1979: 4; Meisner 1982: 18; Yu 1994b: 148-150.) It is also a theory of voluntarism; the key factor to determine the social transformation is not objective reality traditionally thought by Marxism to necessitate any form of social transformation, but the knowledge and will of each individual. (See Dirlik 2005: 120-133; Meisner 1982: 38-61, 89-109.) Because of these two factors, Maoist Marxism has a distinct utopian character. Its utopianism doesn't only consist in that it projects a perfect future as the end of human history that can be finally and fully realized. Regardless of objective reality, it asserts that China could rely upon the knowledge and will of each individual, which are obtained mainly through ideological inculcation and frequent mass movements organized from above, to realize the most advanced form of human society. (See Dirlik 2005: 19, 120, 133; Meisner 1982: xi, 22-25, 59-72.) This becomes the most dangerous utopian element of Maoist Marxism, and its consequences were ferociously fleshed out in the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

The whole process of China's modernization before the 1970s, in historical hindsight, was obviously a failure. After the 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping called on to suspend the ideological controversy and concentrate upon the development of national economy, what his reform intended is to acquire the most advanced technologies and economic policies from the West while maintaining the solidarity of CCP's leadership, ideology, and institutions. Deng's reform had much in common with the Self-Strengthen Movement, painstakingly repeating the cycle⁵.

2 The Rising of Neo-Confucianism in Medieval China

⁵ Dirlik has a similar observation in Dirlik 2005: 232.

It is very rare for scholars to compare China's modernization to the rising of Neo-Confucianism as the dominant intellectual movement in medieval China⁶. Because the logic of both historical processes are so similar, I will argue that the former is essentially a mirror image of the latter.

There are three phases to the rising of Neo-Confucianism in Medieval China that parallel the process of China's modernization: literary (almost technological), institutional, and intellectual⁷. The similarities are due to analogous central concerns: for the case of the rising Neo-Confucianism, it is how to tackle with dynastic crises which were caused by deteriorating domestic political environments and the aggression of the ethnic minority groups from northern China. Internalization and idealization are responses in both. In the last phase of Neo-Confucianism, there is even a hint of moral utopianism.

In the early and climatic periods of Tang Dynasty (618-907), Chinese culture was syncretic and prosperous. It didn't prioritize either idea or its cultural expression. On the one hand, the royal court sponsored the compilation and annotation of a magnificent collection of classics from different intellectual traditions, including Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. It also, on the other hand, encouraged expression of these substantial ideas in various refining artistic forms: poetry, painting, calligraphy, dance, and etc. (See Bol 1992: 84-107.) Tang's culture illustrated

⁶ "Medieval China" refers to the long period of Chinese history from Tang to Ming (618-1644), when Neo-Confucianism had gradually established its dominant influence in the intellectual world. Two main reasons explain why I would not include the development of Confucian thought in Qing Dynasty in my narrative of the rising of Neo-Confucianism. First, according to traditional scholarly views, the paradigm of Confucian scholarship was transformed from Learning of Dao (daoxue 道學) to Evidential Studies (puxue 樸學) in Qing Dynasty. Second, the dramatic political and cultural change due to the aggression of Western powers after the 1840s obstructed the natural development of Confucian scholarship in Qing. Therefore, it is a great challenge for scholars to treat the evidential studies in Qing as a continuous whole with Neo-Confucianism. Analyses of the paradigmatic shift of Confucian learning after Qing can be found in Ji 1990: 116-124; Liu 2005: 163-175; Qian 2002: 151-157; Yu 2000: 290-353.

⁷ This way of periodization is mainly inspired by Yu 2004b (1): 39-56, 328-346 and Yu 2004b (2): 411-422. It can also be verified by Peter Bol's narrative of the rising of Neo-Confucianism in Bol 1992. I name the third phase of China's modernization as "cultural" in order to stay in tune with the New Cultural Movement and the Cultural Revolution which are both hallmarks of this phase. However, as analyzed before, the greatest influence of this phase is to import new ideas from the West and thus intellectual.

the ideal of the virtuous person (junzi 君子) put forward by Confucius: “to blend properly one’s substance and refinement 文質彬彬” (*Analects* 6:16, in Chan 1963a: 29).

However, Tang’s decline was caused by the An-Shi Rebellion in 755, when local warlords captured the capital and ousted the emperor. This dynastic crisis triggered the Movement of Ancient Prose, the first phase of the rising Neo-Confucianism, which started in middle Tang until early Song (960-1279, and Song Dynasty is further divided into Northern and Southern Song by 1127, when northern China was captured by the ethnic minority regime, Jin 金).

The Movement of Ancient Prose, launched by Han Yu (768-824), affirmed that the prevalence in early Tang of the Buddhist, Taoist and other similar ideas that deviated from the Dao of Chinese ancient sage-kings had contaminated people’s morality and lead to Tang’s declination. In order to re-establish morality and revitalize the dynasty, people, especially the literati, needed to recapture and internalize the original Confucian ideas which had achieved their paradigmatic expressions in the Pre-Qin period (before 221 B.C.E) and the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E - 220 C.E). The concrete method to achieve this goal was to re-adopt the literary craft of “ancient prose” which was much plainer and more philosophically grounded than the flowery “rhythmical prose 骈文” popular in Han’s time. (See Bol 1992: 130-136.)

The Movement of Ancient Prose in the early Song period maintained basically the same motives and methodology as its predecessor in Tang. Its proponents tried to search for ideas in primitive Confucian classics in order to bring peace and order to Song’s politics. Simultaneously, they strived to develop the correct way to compose literature in order to transmit these ideas. Nevertheless, although this movement had its political appeals, they had not yet been put into practice in the institutional level. Although its investigation into early Confucian classics touched on some philosophical topics, the discourse had not delved into the nature of human mind-heart

(xinxing, 心性) and its metaphysical foundation as later Neo-Confucian reformers did. The Movement of Ancient Prose is, therefore, a reformational movement of literary craft lead by the literati elite. [See Bol 2008: 52-55; Yu 2004b (1): 39, 195, 328-338.] Literary craft is a certain form of “technique”; the movement as the first phrase of the rising of Neo-Confucianism only involved the shallowest, albeit an initiative, aspect of Neo-Confucianism. Because of this, we can also understand this movement as technological, analogous to the first phase of China’s modernization. However, given the emphasis of this movement upon the right technique of composing literature as the one which can succeed to transmit the genuine Confucian ideas, it helped to transform the center of gravity of Chinese culture from a syncretic balance between substance and refinement to the preponderance of idea over its cultural expression (see Bol 2008: 56).

Several major defeats by the northern regimes of ethnic minority quickly deepened Northern Song’s dynastic crisis. It urged literati elite to put their political appeals which had hitherto only circulated in a literary form into immediate practice and triggered the second phrase: the political reform of Wang An-shi (1021-1086). Based upon a philosophical re-interpretation of primitive Confucian classics, especially *The Zhou Book of Ritual* 周礼, Wang An-shi proposed various political, economic, military and educational reformations under the sponsorship of his emperor. Impressively, he also attempted to ground these institutional reformations on his own understanding of human nature and its cosmological conditions, sharing emphasis on idea and morality with the other two phases. However, this highly philosophical and idealistic political reformation was trapped in a seesaw battle with the imperial court’s conservative power for decades. It didn’t succeed in promoting the re-ascendence of the dynasty atop the northern aggressive powers as had been expected. [See Bol 1992: 214-252; Yu 2004b (1): 40, 346.]

In the view of Cheng Yi (1033-1107), one of the most important pioneering Neo-Confucian philosophers, the dynastic crisis indeed ultimately stemmed from immorality. However, the insufficiency of the Movement of Ancient Prose to deal with the crisis was due to a shallow understanding of morality and the failure of Wang An-shi's reformation was a result of his moral philosophy, being too adulterated with Buddhist and other non-Confucian elements. Therefore, before any successful political reform could occur, the dynasty ought to concentrate upon rectifying people's mind and thus equipping each individual with the right idea of morality. [See Yu 2004b (1): 45-52, 108.] Cheng Yi took "pattern-principle" (li, 理) to refer to any cohering relationship between humans and between humans and the cosmos, upon which an individual's moral behavior depends⁸. Accordingly, "Learning of Dao" (daoxue 道學), the genuine curriculum for literati, was defined as a process to internalize right moral ideas through an investigation of the pattern-principles of things. In contrast with "Literary Learning" (wenxue, 文學) which Cheng Yi believed the literati had been pursuing, the Learning of Dao almost totally denied the necessity of cultural refinement for people to understand the substantial idea of morality. (See Bol 1992: 305-326; Bol 2008: 163-167.) With this new idea of learning, Neo-Confucianism embarked upon its final phase: intellectual.

According to the traditional understanding of Neo-Confucianism's intellectual history, this phrase is divided into two subphases: the Cheng-Zhu school of pattern-principle and the Lu-Wang school of mind-heart. While endorsing the recovery model that conceived of moral goodness as inherent in human beings at birth, Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529) differed from Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi (1130-1200) on the nature of knowledge. Wang argued that access to

⁸ My translation of *li* as "pattern-principle", together with the following interpretation in this sentence, tries to synthesize discrete translations in current English scholarship with an emphasis upon my own understanding of the semantics of this term. A detailed discussion of the translation could be found in Angle 2012: 158-159.

innate goodness did not come from the cumulative investigation of the many pattern-principles in external things, but from the momentary attainment of the “innate knowledge of the good” (liangzhi 良知) from within the human mind-heart⁹.

Although it is not my purpose here to investigate the development of Neo-Confucianism after Wang Yang-ming, I do wish to point out that a tendency of moral utopianism appeared in some followers of Wang in the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and some scholars referred to these followers as the left-wing school of Wang (see Ji 1990: 17). According to Wang Yang-ming’s teachings of the completeness (juzu, 具足) and the continuous presence (jianzai, 見在) of the innate knowledge of the good, proponents of this school believed that: there is one dimension of human mind-heart which has the potential to encompass all the pattern-principles of things in the cosmos enabling a human to appropriately respond to all possible cosmic events, and furthermore, the potentiality of this dimension can actually function well at any moment in ordinary people’s life (see Ji 1990: 25-41; Peng 2003: 15-46; Qian 2002: 172-176). Insofar as they believe it is possible for a human to become a perfect moral being in reliance upon an impeccable dimension of human mind-heart regardless of any constraint by objective reality and moral discipline, this left-wing school of Wang resonates with Mao’s voluntarist Marxism in a way of moral utopianism.

Insofar as Neo-Confucianism was originally a program undertaken by Chinese literati to save their dynasty from political crises through individual moral self-cultivation, it failed. Whether they promoted their Dao from above by convincing a sagely emperor (dejun xingdao, 得君行道) or from below by enlightening ordinary people (juemin xingdao 覺民行道) (see Yu 2006: 38), this program neither warded off the aggressive powers of ethnic minority nor did it

⁹ The Difference between Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming is a perennial conundrum for all later Confucian learners. My wording of the difference takes Keenan 2011:13 into reference.

make the imperial court less corrupted and disorderly. The state was not the creation of the Neo-Confucian literati, yet its success was thought to be the objective of their learning. By the standard of Neo-Confucian moral teachings, the state is actually unruly (see de Bary 1991: 109).

3 The Philosophical Root in the *Great Learning*

Why did China's modernization and the rising of Neo-Confucianism experience very similar phases: technological, institutional and intellectual? Given the fact that ironically one of the processes crystalized into a radical anti-Confucianism while the other claimed that genuine Confucianism was the panacea of all problems, the following question seems even more intriguing: why were both processes equally oriented to internalization, idealization, and in some sense, utopianism? Furthermore, why did both of them, assessed by their own key motives, fail? Scholars have attempted to narrate and analyze each of these processes independently, but rarely have they been investigated in tandem¹⁰. In my view, it is not adequate to explain these events with just concrete historical factors¹¹, since these factors can only refer to one of the events, not both.

My thesis is that only in resort to the philosophical root of a holistic mode of thinking, which is best represented by one of the most important Confucian Canons, the *Great Learning*, can we find the key to these questions.

The *Great Learning* has undoubtedly greatly influenced the Chinese intellectual world during the concerned period. It was Han Yu, the originator of the rising of Neo-Confucianism, who first used the text to protest against the infringement of Taoist and Buddhist ideas on the literati (see

¹⁰ Bol 1992, 2008; Dirlik 2005; Fung 2010; Keenan 2011; Qian, 2002; Yu 1994a, 1994b, 2004a, 2004b, 2006 are examples of the independent study. Yu 2004b (2): 917 insinuates the possibility of understanding the process of "searching for truth from the West" in modern China as echoing the idealizing tendency of the rising of Neo-Confucianism, yet doesn't actually put these two processes in comparison.

¹¹ These factors corresponding to the aforementioned independent studies could be found in Bol 2008: 1-35; Dirlik 2005: 20, 47; Fung 2010: 190, 262; Yu 1994a: 210-218; Yu 1994b: 142; Yu 2000: 166.

Gardner 1986: 18-19). After the compilation and annotation of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, the text was considered “the gate through which beginning students enter into virtue” and occupied a foundational position in the Confucian canonical system of Four Books (see Gardner 1986: 4). Until 1905 when the Confucian civil examination was officially abrogated, this Chen-Zhu interpretation of the *Great Learning*, which underwent a moderate modification by the school of Wang Yang-ming and some scholars of evidential studies in Qing dynasty, was actually received as orthodoxy (see Keenan 2011: 85-86). Further, most of the active intellectuals in early modern China, including the most radical opponents of Confucianism, had studied Confucianism as part of their early education. Given this centrality of the *Great Learning* to Chinese intellectual life, it is a logical choice to analyze the philosophical rationale undergirding both the rising of Neo-Confucianism and China’s modernization on its basis.

The *Great Learning* was originally written for the ruler; however, during the Neo-Confucian reformation, it was thought to be a general guideline of education for all ordinary people (see Gardner 1986: 20-40). The two paragraphs that best display this holistic thinking are as follows:

“4.1 If an ancient person wished that all persons under Heaven manifest their luminous virtues, he would first govern his state well. 4.2 If he wished to govern his state well, he would first regulate his family. 4.3 If he wished to regulate his family, he would first cultivate himself. 4.4 If he wished to cultivate himself, he would first rectify his mind-heart. 4.5 If he wished to rectify his mind-heart, he would first make his intentions sincere. 4.6 If he wished to make his intentions sincere, he would first extend his knowledge. 4.7 The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things.

5.1 When things are investigated, knowledge is extended. 5.2 When knowledge is extended, intentions are sincere. 5.3 When intentions are sincere, the mind-heart is rectified. 5.4 When the

mind-heart is rectified, the person is cultivated. 5.5 When the person is cultivated, the family will be regulated. 5.6 When the family is regulated, the state will be governed well. 5.7 When the state is governed well, there will be peace under Heaven.”¹²

The key term in this textual chain is in 4.5, *cheng yi* (□意), to make one’s intentions sincere. *Yi* (意) is taken to be an intentional response of human mind-heart to external things when they affect it. For example, if one hates the hateful smell and loves the lovely color, he or she will have an intention of “hate” and “love” (see Zhu 2002: 20). An intention understood as such is often attached to various spontaneous emotions. The standard by which to judge the sincerity of intentions is whether they can be held in public as in private. If a person does a very bad thing in private, yet dares not to expose him or herself by the same way in public, his or her intention to pursue the bad thing is not sincere. A sincere intention is in this sense an invariable element of one’s personality whenever and wherever the person is. Therefore, in the text, the teaching about *cheng yi* is connected to a specific moral discipline: *shen du* (慎独), vigilant solitude (Zhu 2002: 22). A person of vigilant solitude is one who can abide by moral rules even in private. In this

¹² This translation is adapted from Chan 1963a: 86; Keenan 2011: 38 and Gardner 1986: 91-92. The original text according to Zhu Xi is in Zhu 2002: 17, in compliance with which I mark the order of each sentence by the first number representing the paragraph and the second for the sentence. I change the subject of 4.1 - 4.6 from plural into singular with a purpose to reflect the Neo-Confucian emphasis upon “learning for one’s self” (*weijizhixue* □己之学) (the phrase is from *Analects* 14: 24, and a scholarly analysis could be found in Bol 1992: 305-326, 337). The use of “he” rather than “he or she” is to maintain the historical context, rather than show any sexual bias of mine. My philosophical interpretation in the following is based upon Zhu Xi’s and Wang Yang-ming’s common understandings of the text. However, in case there is a significant discrepancy between them, I will specify it explicitly. Zhu Xi’s understanding of the *Great Learning* could be found mainly in these texts: *The Great Learning in Chapter and Verse* 大學章句, in Zhu 2002: 13-28; *Further Questions about the Great Learning* 大學或問, in Zhu 2002: 505-547; the 14th to 18th rolls of the *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu* 朱子語類, in Zhu 1998: 249-427. Wang Yang-ming’s mature understanding of the text which pivots upon the term “the extension of knowledge” (*zhi zhi* 致知) could be found mainly in *Letter in Reply to Gu Dongqiao* 答顧東橋書, in Wang 1992: 41-57; *Letter in Reply to Vice-Minister Luo Zheng-an* 答羅整庵少宰書, in Wang 1992: 75-78; *A Preface to the Ancient Version of the Great Learning* 大學古本序, in Wang 1992: 242; *Inquiry on the Great Learning* 大學問, in Wang 1992: 967-973. An analysis of the development of Wang Yang-ming’s thought of the *Great Learning* in contrast with Zhu Xi could be found in Qian 2002: 38-84.

case, his or her pursuit of morality would be voluntary, for the sake of oneself (□己) , rather than for the sake of others (□人) .

Although sincere intentions are usually attached to spontaneous emotions, the sheer spontaneity of emotions does not guarantee that the corresponding intentions are sincere. People's judgement of the nature of affecting things could be wrong, and their following spontaneous emotions would be inappropriate. Therefore, *cheng yi* is premised upon *zhi zhi* (致知), to extend one's knowledge. The knowledge to be extended is the one of pattern-principles, which refer to any dynamic and harmonizing relationship between cosmic realities. Because no pattern-principle of any specific thing can be fully clarified without a comprehensive grasp of all the pattern-principles of its related things, the extension of knowledge is culminated by an ecstatic fulfillment of human cognitive and spiritual capacity, a penetration of human mind-heart into the One pattern-principle of all under Heaven. For Zhu Xi, this ecstatic fulfillment is characterized by a sagely omniscience through which all the qualities of all things in the world and all the operations within human mind-heart are known (see Zhu 2002: 20). For Wang Yang-ming, it is a mysterious union felt by human mind-heart with all under Heaven, and a corresponding sagely omnipotence through which all things-in-becomings in the cosmos can be appropriately responded (see Wang 1992: 966, 972).

In a word, if spontaneous emotions can be grounded upon the knowledge of the pattern-principles of things, one's intentions would be sincere. One would thus find his or her true self. For a Confucian, someone's true self is a peculiar unity of human being-in-becoming which continues to be in tune with the all-encompassing dynamic and harmonizing cosmic creative power, Heaven. Once finding one's true self, in the term of the *Great Learning*, one could also manifest his or her luminous virtue (明明德) .

The practice instructed by the *Great Learning* after one manifests the luminous virtue by oneself is to help other people manifest their own luminous virtues relying on the moral influence of one's manifested luminous virtue. These people are told to "regulate one's family", "govern one's state well", and "bring peace throughout all under Heaven". This system can be imaged as several expanding concentric circles through which a well-cultivated virtuous person in the center helps to transform the moral characters of his or her neighbors by the method of *shu* (恕, empathy). *Shu* means "to help the others to establish what one establishes oneself, to help the others to accomplish what one accomplishes oneself" (*Analects* 6:28, in Chan 1963a: 31), and "do not do to others that one does not want to be done" (*Analects* 15:23, in Chan 1963a: 44). In the *Great Learning*, this method is called the Dao of Measuring-Square (*xieju*, 絜矩), because it is taken to be the measure of a person's relational behaviors towards the others (See Zhu 2002: 24).

Although Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming disagree significantly on their understandings of the last two terms of the quoted text: *zhi zhi* and *ge wu* (格物, the investigation of things), they both share an ecstatic optimism, either in the way of a cognitive (Zhu) or a performative (Wang) penetration of human mind-heart into all the pattern-principles of all things under Heaven¹³. Besides, they both share the belief that peace between states and the order within a state is ultimately dependent upon the moral self-cultivation of each individual, either the individual is conceived mainly as a sagely emperor who organizes to promote the Dao from above or as ordinary people sustaining the Dao from below. Based upon these commonalities of the traditional understandings of the text, we can reflect upon its philosophical proclivity in relation to the issues we raised at the beginning of this section.

¹³ Ecstatic optimism of Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming is a potential form of the moral utopianism of the left-wing school of Wang. The boundary between these two is whether the consummate status of human spirituality in the moment of ecstatic fulfillment is argued as being capable of a full realization in ordinary moments of human life. There are reservations and hesitations in Zhu Xi and Wang Yang-ming's works to disclaim this argument. See Zhu 1988: 295, 308, 396; Wang 1992:117-118, 1299-1300.

Given Whitehead's definition of religion as "what the individual does with his own solitariness" (Whitehead 1926: 16), and especially because what the text intends in 4.3-4.7 and 5.1-5.5 is to ground moral rules upon the knowledge of cosmic realities in each individual's mind so as to construct an "anthropocosmic" (Tu 1989: 9) worldview, we can understand the first five steps from "investigation of things" in 5.1 to "cultivate one's person" in 5.4 as religious. Because it is during the interaction between humans, rather than in the introspective self-cultivation of a solitary person, that moral issues actually take place, we can understand the sixth step in 5.5, "regulate one's family", as ethical. Correspondingly, "govern one's state well" and "bring peace throughout all under heaven" in 5.6 and 5.7 are political. Understood as such, what the *Great Learning* intends is to establish one doctrinal standpoint in each individual's mind which enables to fulfill his or her religious, ethical, and political concerns all at once.

We can now return to our original question, why were China's modernization and the rising of Neo-Confucianism both oriented towards internalization and idealization? That is because under the influence of the *Great Learning*, the participants of these two historical processes shared the same belief that the solution of the political crises at the state level depends upon a thorough grasp of a single correct doctrine understood and practiced by each individual about how to resolve these crises. Why did both of these processes end in some radical and utopian phases? That is because under the same influence, they shared another similar belief that there is indeed a single correct doctrine which enables humans to fulfill their multiple concerns and resolve their diverse problems all at once, and this doctrinal standpoint could be actually realized by each individual through cognitive and voluntary human efforts regardless of the constraint of objective reality. Thus, when the outside aggressive power has no advanced intellectual tradition, this internal, idealistic, and holistic methodology will deal with the state crisis by consolidating an established intellectual tradition within the state (i.e. the rising of Neo-Confucianism). In addition, the choice of Confucianism made by Chinese literati to deal with the state crisis, instead of Taoism and Buddhism, is due to Confucianism's holistic nature and its emphasis on both statecraft and individual self-cultivation. Though, when the aggressive power has its own

advanced intellectual tradition, the Chinese elite will attempt to appropriate those ideas to completely replace the old ones. Thus, we can understand why the radical anti-Confucian intellectuals in modern China could share a similar holism with its Neo-Confucian predecessors and why the final intellectual result of China's modernization, Maoist Marxism, was extremely anti-Confucian while being just as holistic as Confucianism¹⁴.

Why did these processes fail? There are unruly elements of the state that can't be managed by a moralistic approach to statecraft. This is the failure of Neo-Confucianism. China's modernization in the form of voluntaristic holism denied the possibility of progressive reformation through the cooperation of people with pluralistic ideas and multiple resources. The implosion of this culminated form of China's modernization, together with its apparent shrinking back into its historical starting point, is proof of its failure. In my view, both failures are philosophically rooted in a cognitive error of the holistic program of the *Great Learning*.

It is surprising to see the relationship of necessary conditioning between the adjacent items in 4.1-4.7 is transformed to one of sufficient conditioning in 5.1-5.7¹⁵. Given this transformation, what the text actually affirms is that a person can fulfill his or her political and ethical concerns if

¹⁴ A philosophical source in traditional Confucianism speaks for ideological characteristics of dominant intellectual trends in modern China which are apparently anti-Confucian. My analysis of this point stands in line with Lin 1979. Three main points, however, distinguish my research from my predecessor's: one, although Lin emphasizes the centrality of idea in the traditional Confucian worldview (Lin 1979: 48-49), he didn't specify the structure of the ideas which can be counted as the pivots of this worldview. In my analysis, these pivotal ideas include at least three layers: political, ethical, and religious. Together, they form a consistent whole with an interior hierarchical structure to represent the holistic feature of Confucian worldview. In my view, an overlook of this structural feature would mis-conceptualize either the phenomenon or the cause of China's modernization. Two, Lin didn't take the rising of Neo-Confucianism as a historical forerunner of China's modernization. Three, Lin's philosophical analysis of Confucianism in relation to the concerned historical events doesn't concentrate on a single cardinal text and thus its explanatory power is more diffuse.

¹⁵ Zhu Xi sometimes tries not to understand the necessary conditioning between items in 4.4-4.7 as also sufficient. Yet, his interpretation of "make one's intentions sincere (*cheng yi* 誠意)", "rectify one's mind-heart (*zheng xin*, 正心)" and "cultivate one's person (*xiu shen*, 修身)" in 5.2-5.4 actually proposes no more connotation than the ones that have been covered by "extend one's knowledge (*zhi zhi*, 致知)" and "the investigation of things (*ge wu*, 格物)". The only exception seems to be his emphasis upon the continuous volitional persistence of "cheng yi", "zheng xin" and "xiu shen" on what has been achieved in "zhi zhi" and "ge wu". (See Zhu 1988: 276, 303, 311, 332, 354, and Zhu 2002: 21, 512, 533, 536.) But this doesn't necessarily increase the connotation of the former three in comparison to the latter if we can have a more adequate interpretation of the latter. In contrast, Wang Yang-ming thinks the eight items are actually just one: to extend one's knowledge (Wang 1992: 76, 971-972), and thus provides a seemingly more radical interpretation which I think more complies with the original syntax of the text. Unsurprisingly, both of them agree about the necessary and sufficient conditioning between adjacent items in 4.1-4.3 and 5.5-5.7, since they both endorse an essentially moralistic approach to statecraft.

and only if he or she has fulfilled his or her religious concern. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that peace between states and the order within a state are ultimately dependent upon voluntary moral practice of each individual which can be firmly sustained by his or her religious belief. Yet, to think this is the only means to bring peace and order to states is overly optimistic and unrealistic. A well-cultivated virtuous person cannot guarantee his or her family members will become equally virtuous based only on his or her moral influence and religious charisma. By the same token, a virtuous emperor can't bring order and peace to his or her state simply through his or her moral self-cultivation. Politics, ethics and religion are three fundamentally different yet intricately interconnected areas of human life. Their relationship is not as simple and monolithic as the *Great Learning* implied.

This misguided form of holism, so to speak, asserts people could fulfill their multiple concerns and resolve, all at once, their diverse problems if and only if they adopt in their mind one single doctrine. In my view, this is the ultimate philosophical reason behind the pathological reaction of Chinese intelligentsia when some dynastic and national crises compelled them to take the overall transformation of individual minds as the only efficient way to resolve these challenges. With its misguided conception of the pluralistic and dynamic social realities, it explains both the processes of the two historical events and their failures.

4 Ultimate Concern and Preliminary Concerns

If we compare the teachings of the *Great Learning* with Paul Tillich's philosophy, the error will be more obvious.

Paul Tillich's definition of religion as ultimate concern is mainly grounded in his ontological approach of the philosophy of religion which affirms that the philosophers' Absolute of *logos* and the religionists' Absolute of *pathos* ought to be identical (see Tillich 1959: 22). Therefore the concept of ultimate concern is implied by two series of conditions. There are conditions of reality. Ultimate reality conditions the other realities without itself being thus conditioned. Correspondingly, there are conditions of human concerns. The unconditionality of ultimate reality means that the concern about it is also ultimate. Thus, ultimate concern places an

unconditional demand upon all preliminary concerns so that if a person has to make choices about his or her concerns during crucial moments of life, one's ultimate concern is the last one he or she would give up. (See Tillich 1959: 1-2, 105; Tillich 1951: 11-14.)

In a comparative perspective, the process of moral self-cultivation taught by the *Great Learning* is easily aligned with Tillich's definition of ultimate concern. As analyzed previously, the Confucian thinkers in their interpretations of the *Great Learning* tried to ground the demand of political and moral rules upon the pattern-principles of things formed and shaped by the all-encompassing dynamic and harmonious cosmic creative power, Heaven. In this sense, the One pattern-principle of Heaven which includes and coheres the Many pattern-principles of things, is ultimate reality. On the other hand, the text also teaches that if and only if an individual fulfills his or her concern about grasping the pattern-principles of things can his or her other ethical and political concerns be satisfied. In this sense, the concern for the "extension of knowledge" is the ultimate concern by which the fulfillment of all other preliminary concerns is conditioned.

However, although Tillich maintains that religion as ultimate concern provides "depth, direction and unity" to all preliminary concerns (Tillich 1959: 105), he never asserts, like the Confucian case in the *Great Learning*, that the fulfillment of ultimate concern is the necessary and sufficient condition of fulfilling preliminary concerns. In other words, what the fulfillment of ultimate concern could guarantee is the "meaning", rather than the "means" of the fulfillment of preliminary concerns. Thus, Tillich does not oversimplify the interconnection between piety, morality, and earthly happiness.

For Tillich, the fulfillment of ultimate concern takes a form of momentary and ecstatic religious experience during which the divine Spirit is manifested in the spiritual dimension of human life. At this moment humans as finite beings are grasped by the infinite creative power of God as ground of being (see Tillich 1963: 111-128), they are transformed into their New Being as an essential union with God without removing their own existences (see Tillich 1963: 222), and then enliven themselves in a dynamic and harmonious communion with all other creatures without losing their own identities - which is called Agape (see Tillich 1963: 137, 143). As a

consummate fulfillment of humans' deepest concern, this Spiritual Presence sets up the ideal for human life while simultaneously evincing that this ideal could become actual. Nevertheless, according to Tillich, human life is a "multidimensional unity", and the actual fulfillment of ultimate concern can never be full and complete, even at the most fulfilling ecstatic moments.

From an individual's perspective, human life is comprised of five dimensions: inorganic, physical, psychological (together, these two form the organic dimension), personal and spiritual. Because each of these dimensions is indispensable to and coexists within human life, if something happens in one dimension, its impact on the others will not be so determinative as to repeal their intrinsic qualities. Therefore, if Spiritual Presence grasps a person in the spiritual dimension of his or her life and thus makes the person invigorated by an unambiguous presence of meaning, then this could impact but not abolish the nature of the other dimensions. (See Tillich 1963: 11-30.) Rather, because of the prevalence of the schematic subject-object split in all dimensions other than the spiritual, human life is never divested of ambiguities, even at the most unambiguous ecstatic moments (see Tillich 1963: 276). As a consequence, Tillich argues that the presence of divine Spirit in human life is always fragmentary (see Tillich 1963: 71). Thus, a perfect human is not one who could fully realize the unambiguous presence of meaning at some ecstatic moments of life, which Tillich thinks is impossible. Rather, a person ought to, under the guidance of the ideal informed by the unambiguous manifestation of Spiritual Presence, continue to fight with the ambiguous, transform the ambiguous, and create new manifestations of the unambiguity within ambiguities, although this winning-over can only take place fragmentarily and anticipatorily. (See Tillich 1963: 222-241.)

From a collective perspective, another important dimension to human life is the historical one. Tillich's thought about the fragmentary manifestation of divine Spirit in the ecstatic moments of human life is brought into his reflection on the destiny of human history based on themes in traditional Christian eschatology. For Tillich, since Spiritual Presence is the actual, albeit incomplete, realization of the ideal of human life, the aim of human history is also revealed through it. Therefore, it is unnecessary to interpret the traditional Christian symbols of

eschatology as “the last” in the temporal sense. The eschaton of human history which could be fragmentarily realized in the form of Spiritual Presence at any moment of human life is actually the aim of history in the normative sense. (See Tillich 1963: 307, 320, 373.) Understood as such, Tillich believes that there is no perfect status of human history towards which all humans should strive to achieve. In that case, the status of human history, concrete and finite, would be unduly considered infinite, and thus become a false and demonic object of ultimate concern. (See Tillich 1963: 358-359.) On the other hand, humans could fully devote themselves to realizing a better status of human society at specific historical moments, which he calls *kairos*, under the guidance of the already experienced ideal while simultaneously acknowledging that that status is not to be worshiped but criticized and if necessary, rejected. (See Tillich 1971: 177-178.) In general, Tillich conceives human history as a two-dimensional dynamic process. The momentary realization of an ideal in the form of Spiritual Presence on the vertical dimension needs to be furthermore manifested as actual improvements of human conditions on the horizontal dimension. Meanwhile, the development of human society on the horizontal dimension needs the continuous guidance and infusion of prophetic power from the fulfilled ultimate concern on the vertical dimension. (See Tillich 1963: 420; Tillich 1971: 179.)

In a word, the unambiguity of the fulfillment of ultimate concern can only be manifested in the ambiguities of the fulfillment of preliminary concerns either for an individual’s life or for human history. According to Tillich, the condition of ultimate concern upon preliminary concerns is at best necessary, but absolutely not sufficient. In my view, Tillich’s thought about the fragmentary manifestation of Spiritual Presence in an individual’s life is a powerful antidote to the aforementioned Confucian type of utopianism, the moral one which affirms the complete realization of an ideal for specifically cultivated persons and for their specific life moments. Correspondingly, his philosophy of history in relation to his reinterpretation of Christian eschatology is an equally powerful corrective to the aforementioned Maoist-Marxist type of utopianism, the historical one which affirms a full realization of the perfect status of human

history in reliance on the knowledge and will of each individual¹⁶. In my view, the moral type of utopianism in traditional Confucianism is an intellectual and psychological preparation for modern Chinese people to accept the Maoist-Marxist historical type of utopianism once the spiritual dimension of Confucianism is misunderstood and forgotten. Therefore, I urge contemporary Confucians to take Tillich's philosophy of religion seriously in order to render a healthier revival of Confucianism.

6 Conclusion: Separation of Church and State

A misguided form of holism in Confucianism presumes the fulfillment of ultimate (religious) concern is the necessary and sufficient condition of the fulfillment of preliminary (ethical, political) concerns. I think that, in order to rectify this cognitive error, the contemporary re-institutionalization of Confucianism ought to separate church and state.

Many models of the principle of separation of church and state have been implemented in the West (see Miller 2012: 157-165). But, for our purposes, the most relevant one was originally developed by Martin Luther and was modified by Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke. Compared with others, this Protestant model was better received, especially in U.S (see Hamburger 2004: 321-328). Also, since the re-institutionalization of Confucianism as a world religion is our objective, a model that does not breed hostility towards religions and their roles in democratic polity is strongly preferred.

There are three distinct rationales underlying this Protestant model of separation of church and state:

The first rationale is the right of private judgement. There is no earthly authority higher than the individual in regard to one's spiritual matters. Thus, the state has no right to favor any specific religious institution over another. (See Hamburger 2004: 284; Miller 2012: 17-18, 57-60.)

The second rationale is that the origin, end, and business of church and state are absolutely different. The state addresses people's interest in this world and for this life, while the church is

¹⁶ Scholarly reviews of Tillich's thought of utopianism can be found in Bulman 1981: 69, 78; Stone 2009: 208-221.

where people concern themselves for eternal happiness and the ultimate salvation of their soul in the afterlife. Therefore, there is no right of the state upon the church affairs, and vice versa. (See Miller 2012: 22-23, 77-79; Hamburger 2004:43-44.)

Third, in contrast to the second rationale, church and state both attempt to preserve the well-being of humankind. A good government depends upon the obeisance of its citizens to a series of sustaining moral codes which are equally endorsed and efficiently promoted by religion. Therefore, the separation of church and state doesn't mean the separation of religion and government; the difference between these two institutions consists in their different means to accomplish the same goal. The church accomplishes this goal through education, persuasion and, spiritual transformation; the state through social contract, law, and coercion. (See Miller 2012: 63-64; Hamburger 2004: 67, 377, 485).

Comparatively, there is no difficulty for contemporary Confucians to endorse the first rationale, since “learning for one’s self” (*weijizhixue* 為己之學) is a perennial tenet underlying all the arduous processes of Confucian moral self-cultivation. Wang Yang-ming provides an impressive example:

“Learning pivots upon the conviction from one’s mind-heart. If words are examined in my mind-heart and found to be wrong, although they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct. How much less for those words from people inferior to Confucius! If words are examined in my mind-heart and found to be correct, although they have come from the mouth of ordinary people, I dare not regard them as wrong. How much less for those words of Confucius!” (Wang 1992: 76, translation adapted from Chan 1963b: 159.)

Furthermore, the third rationale is comparable to the traditional understanding in Confucianism of the distinction between “government by ritual” (礼治) and “government by law” (法治). Government by ritual is to nurture people’s moral consciousness through education so as to establish an autonomous type of self-governance of the people. In contrast, government by law is to preclude people’s wrong behaviors through punishment and reward without people’s

understanding of the underlying moral rationale of these laws. (See *Analects* 2.3, in Chan 1963a 22.) This is a heteronomous type of government. Although Confucianism prioritizes the former as the most appropriate way for good government, some Neo-Confucian reformers, such as Cheng Yi, think the latter ought not to be taken lightly either:

“The government of ancient sage-kings was based upon two aspects: they resorted to penalty of law to rectify the people, and they resorted to education to bring goodness to mores. It is only after penalty of law is established that education could be carried out. Although the sages thought virtue is more important than penalty of law, they didn’t disregard either of them ... Therefore, it is the priority for the beginning of a government to establish laws. If people can be guided by their fears of penalty of law, even if they cannot understand it, they would follow it. They would not indulge in their uneducated desires, and then they can remove their bad ideas, and know the good way of life (through education) gradually.” (Cheng 1981:720, translation is due to my own.)

Understood as such, government by law actually intends the same target in the way of coercion as government by ritual in the way of education. This will make contemporary Confucians amenable to the aforementioned third rationale.

So the only significant problem is a result of the second rationale, since a non-negotiable division between the sacred and the secular is nowhere present in Confucianism. Fortunately, this is not universally agreed upon within the Protestant model, as it contrasts with the third rationale. Nevertheless, this rationale indeed reminds us that politics, religion, and their intersected partner, ethics, are indeed very different domains of human life. In Tillich’s terminology, politics and ethics are hardwired with ambiguities that cannot be directly shot through with the unambiguous presence of meaning in the religious moments of human life.

Inspired by all these intellectual resources contemporary Confucians can develop a more sustainable way to deal with the relationship between these different life-domains. There are at least two things contemporary Confucians can do to realize a healthier form of the Confucian revival:

Theoretically, Confucian philosophers ought to further explore the political realities that cannot be engaged by the traditional Confucian moralistic approach. On the one hand, they need to provide a more well-rounded interpretation of Confucian religiosity in order to clarify the Confucian ideal of human life as well as the limits to the actualization of this ideal. On the other hand, they should nurture discretion towards all existing polities in contemporary world and do their best to guard and improve the polity which complies with their traditional ideal of human life as closely as possible. I think it is only through this two-way transformation of Confucianism that its holistic mode of thinking could become more flexible, adaptable, and inclusive, rather than misguided. Fortunately, I appreciate the fact that some contemporary Confucian philosophers, such as Mou Zong-san (especially see Mou 2003), have already begun this work.

Practically, contemporary Confucianism ought to search for its institutional independence according to the aforementioned principle of separation of church and state. That means it will build up its constituency on the basis of personal conviction and voluntary participation, while simultaneously helping to construct a humane society through education. If a “Confucian church” seems to borrow too much from the Christian tradition, a combination of “civil society, grassroots and academic organizations” (Angle 2012: 146) is where we can possibly find the institutional basis of Confucianism in the contemporary period.

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