

FATE OF CONFUCIANISM

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Confucianism is one of the rare sociopolitical theories which has special fate in the history of human ideology.

The special thing is that, over thousand years, up until now, Confucianism is still a “living theory” – it is living, not just being displayed in “museums” like many other theories. Despite of its longevity, the fate of Confucianism is “unlucky”. In contrast, its position has many ups and downs. People at large and government often see it as being quite complex. And thus, the evaluation of its role in eras always takes place in different frameworks and dimensions, with different, and often conflicting, attitudes. In 21st century, Confucianism is still controversial in terms of its vitality and pros and cons. The extent of influence of Confucian culture and the charisma of Confucian theory itself still depend ominously on subrogation opinions. That complicates debates on many forums and apparently tends to increase with the rise of the contemporary “Chinese lion”.

In Vietnam, ever since its introduction to this day, Confucianism is still perceived with skepticism. In early 20th century, Vietnam was even considered the first land of Confucianism where its fatal defects were most clearly exposed. However, in periods of transition, Confucius was often highly, but at times excessively, eulogized. The deification of Confucianism always goes hand in hand with doubts and suspicions. The academic and culture atmosphere of Confucianism is the right anticipation of political wind.

I

1. To be or not to be? For Confucianism, this question was posed more than 1000 years ago, in 213-212 BC. At that time, Confucianism suffered the cruel decision on its

survival in the “Burning of books and burying of scholars” policy of Tần Dynasty. Although many researches still defend or justify for more or less plausible reasons why Tần Thủy Hoàng “ordered”, Confucianism is still

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recorded in the history as a philosophy – rule that needs to be vigilant over^(*).

2. “Cannibal theory” was a severe condemnation of Lỗ Tấn in the early 20th century when he awoke Chinese

3. In mainland China, even in the mechanism of command – administration, Confucius still existed as a political entity to the extent that he and Lâm Bru were brought up in criticism in the late 60s (20th century) in the era of “Cultural revolution”. Due to this event, the heritage of Confucian scripts was once again lost. The tomb of Confucius in Khúc Phụ was nearly excavated^(*).

4. However, in other society influenced

culture by the true side of Confucianism^(**). Throughout Southeast Asia, Confucianism was severely criticized when being compared with Western culture. The analysis of its holdback and obstruction in modern society, to say, could be more critical. Confucianism was thought to go down in history forever, however, it did not.

^(*) “The burning of books and burying of scholars”. See: *The burning of books and burying of scholars – it was not Tần Thủy Hoàng’s crime*. Hy Văn translated from *China.com*. <http://www.vietimes.vietnamnet.vn/vn/nhietkevanhoa/5458/index.viet>

^(**) “History does not have date, but every page has the words “humanity, morality” written haphazardly. Tossing and turning, unable to sleep, I tried to read until late at night, then I find, from the beginning to the end, between rows is the word cannibalism”. Lỗ Tấn, *Diary of a mad man*, <http://www.wattpad.com/74187-Nh-t-k-ng-i-i-n-L-T-n>.

^(*) See: Hàm Châu (2006), *Thinking in Khúc Phụ*, <http://www.vietbao.vn/van-hoa/suy-tu-o-khuc-phu/40120418/181/>.

by Confucianism – Taiwan and Hong Kong, Korea and Singapore, Confucianism did not lose its position in the decades of industrialization, in contrast, it was evaluated as a positive cultural factor, contributing to the establishment of new East Asian tigers (NICs/NIEs^(*)). Many Eastern and Western scholars considered the values such as *hardworking, studious, community, responsibility, family etc.* the good qualities which NICs inherited and maintained from Confucian cultural tradition.



4 Asian dragons



Confucius Institutes in Kalmykia (Russia), Jeju (Korea) and California (U.S)

From here, the trend of positive reviews, and even promotion of Confucianism began to be recovered from the late 80s (20th century).

^(*) NICs - (Newly Industrialized Countries). NIEs - (Newly Industrialized Economies). See: Hồ Sĩ Quý (2012), *Social progress: some issues on the development models of East Asian and Southeast Asian countries*, Intellectual Publishing House, Hanoi.

For Vietnamese, although the influence of Confucianism is still controversial, Assoc. and Prof. Phan Ngọc also had a notable comment: “Consciousness is

something you don’t need to learn to know. Overseas Vietnamese hardly know Confucianism, they attack Confucianism vehemently verbally but they still rise up from the most humble origins to become masters of economy, science and technology thanks to the studious tradition initiated by Confucius. The number of immigrants in countries is very big. However, besides countries imbued with

Confucian culture, they find only Jews are comparable to them”^(*). Assoc. and Prof. Trần Đình Hượu said, the most significant legacy of Confucianism is the “practicality”, and the most deplorable thing of Confucianism is the “stupidity, loyalty or illusion of peace under the totalitarian regime”. He wrote: “People who live practically and hold on to reality is what left by Confucianism that heavily influences Confucian countries”^(**). Both two aforementioned comments of two typical scholars mean the importance of Confucianism to Vietnam is not Confucianism itself but rather the Confucian culture.

5. Moving to 21st century, while Chinese economy still remains high growth rate and grows strongly, in mainland China, the promotion of Confucius and Confucianism suddenly become fashionable. Western scholars find that, it seems like China wants to fill the lacks and gaps in ideology. Studies have also said that China intends to switch from Marxism to Confucianism^(***). Domestically,

China’s policy is to build a “harmonious society”, speed up the propaganda, teach and promote writings and publications commenting on Confucius...; consumption culture also competes to abuse the Confucian symbols. The giant statue of Confucius was also erected right at Thiên An Môn Square in February 2012 (but was dismantled quietly just 2 months later). Overseas, China has promoted the construction of “Confucius Institutes”. This type of institute was constructed first in Seoul in 2004. Until now, there have been over 450 offices operating in over 100 countries. In Vietnam, in April 2009, a pilot undertaking on the establishment of Confucian Institute was also signed. Although it seems difficult to appear, in December 2014, this Institute was launch at Hanoi University.

II.

1. Thus, through its not-so-simple fate in history, Confucianism with the characteristic of a sociopolitical theory and also a kind of culture for development, it is asking researchers and sociopolitical activists itself:

- Are Confucian values perhaps not that negative and restrictive like what Lỗ Tấn once criticized? Or perhaps differing from past centuries, does

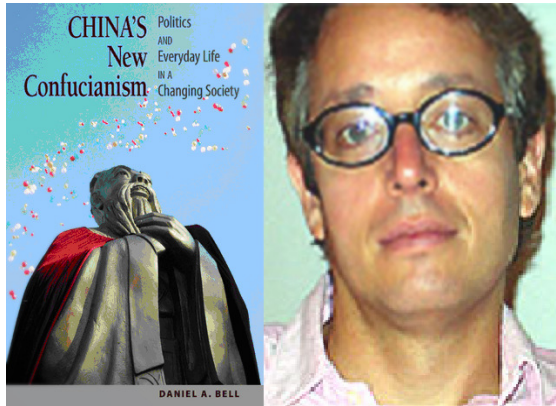
^(*) Phan Ngọc (1999), *Confucianism, its relation with the new era*, Book *Some issues on culture and development in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi p.149-150.

^(**) Trần Đình Hượu (1994), *To modern from tradition*, Published by KX.07. Hanoi.

^(***) Daniel A. Bell (2007), *From Marx to Confucius: Changing Discourses on China’s Political Future*. *Dissent*, Spring 2007 // James Reynolds (2009), *Communists turn to Confucius*, BBC, 23/3/2009. http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/world/2009/03/090323_china_confucianism.shtml. // Nguyễn Hải

Hoàn. *The restoration trend of Confucianism in China*. *Eastern Culture* 2/12/2007. <http://dongtac.net/spip.php?article1345>. // Nguyễn Hải. *Vu Đan phenomenon and the fever of National Study*. *Eastern Culture* 11/7/2007. <http://dongtac.net/spip.php?article813>

Confucianism today have more opportunities to become a theory with



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more positive position and more humane role?

- Can Confucianism cover the lacks in the spiritual life of the society, especially lacks of ideology, which China and someone had expected but were then a little bit disappointed in the religions, theories, values etc. of 20th century?

- With the rise of China, will Confucianism perhaps become the representative of modern Chinese spirit? Will Confucianism develop further when Chinese state pays more attention to it?

2. To be fair, these questions do not imply many ideas for outsiders, but

they seem to be daily bothers of Chinese theorists.

For example, Jing Haifeng (Cảnh Hải Phong), Professor of Shenzhen University complained that, in China, Confucianism was often considered negative, outdated, just had a little bit of “progressive meaning”. That perspective has made “Confucian moral” “become increasingly pale” and “alienated from real life” in the view of the society. According to Jun Haifeng, the cause of the situation was the influence of Hu Shi (Hồ Thích) and Feng Youlan (Phùng Hữu Lan), who had developed the discipline “Chinese philosophy” by the standards of Western philosophy, to the extent of “following meekly”. Knowing Confucianism was prized in Asian NICs, Jing Haifeng said, at that time mainland China startled: “Why do they not “eliminate” the tradition out of the game but rather rely on it to build modernization? Why does Confucian moral, which we consider rags, become the motivation of social harmony and cultural renovation rather than obstacles and burdens for the development of those regions?”^(*).

Or, for example, Chen Fenglin (Trần Phong Lâm), said: “facing the alienation and the mess of global

^(*) See: Jing Haifeng (2008), *Confucian ethics in the era of globalization*. In the book: “Key issues in the study of contemporary philosophy”, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, p.70, 71-79, 80.

perceptions and values, East Asian perceptions and values need to undertake the heavy responsibility of the era to revive the corruption of human spirit ... East Asian people accounts for about a third of mankind who have created for humans the precious heritages in all areas, making the human's future full of hope. East Asia will certainly enter the rank of people who decide the fate of mankind ... If Western culture cannot create a new revival of art and literature in the next period, it will be possible for a new century to appear in which Oriental culture will dominate the world's cultural movement" (*).

3. Apparently, this resurrection of Confucianism has its socioeconomic and political reasons. But in our view, even if every reason has objective, inevitable causes, for researchers, what is resurrecting will need to be identified clearly – In fact, is what actually resurrected in the context of market economy, globalization and rapid changes in China *Confucianism*? Or *Confucian culture*? Or are they just *social-cultural phenomena with Confucian colors*?



Vu Đan, Professor of Beijing Normal University and the fever of “National Study” in China

Please be aware that, in societies with Confucian tradition, from very early, there has been a huge gap between Confucianism and Confucian culture. This phenomenon does not only happen in Vietnam, Korea or Japan – countries where Confucianism is just an exogenous culture – but also in China, among many who follow Confucian culture, there are very few people who are actually Confucian scholars or understand Confucianism. In today's society, this gap is obviously wider: People can be regarded as being imbued with Confucian culture, even with just fragments of ideology, patchy beliefs on ethics, unsystematic guidelines on *humanity, propriety, righteousness, wisdom, trust etc.* while with little understanding of Confucianism. This is very significant when considering the position of Confucianism in the development in the 21st century.

4. In a document published in 2005, we examined researches on Confucian

(*) See: Chen Fenglin, *Guanyu Dongya Jiazhi guan de jidian sikao*, “Waiguo wenti yanjiu”, d.4q., d.47-50y.

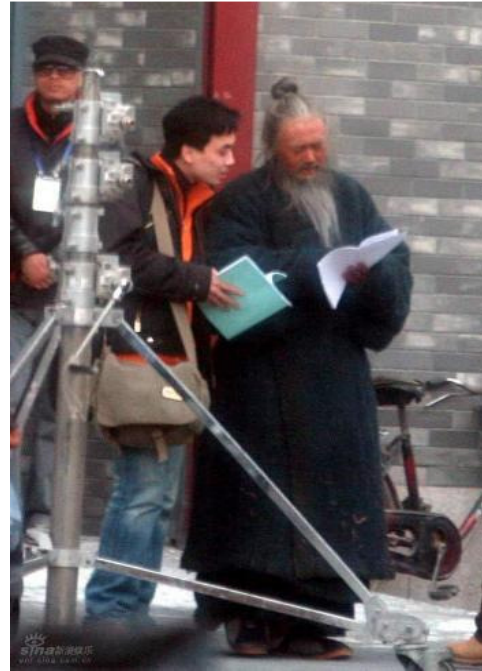
values of 8 typical scholars^(*) in Vietnam and abroad. When classifying values according to the criteria *widely rated as highly ranked in the value ranking*, the top Confucian values in Asian countries noted by these 8 scholars were: 1/ Studious, promoting education; 2/ Hardworking, loving work; 3/ Community responsibility; and 4/ Respect for family, consanguinity (we will not analyze these values further).

Here, we just want to add that, basically, these values are of Confucian culture rather than Confucianism itself.

5. However, even Confucian culture is a diverse world with many phenomena on different levels, reflecting the nature of Confucianism. If the main activities of some Confucius Institutes are only to teach Mandarin and organize tours, the so-called “Confucian culture” here is just a secondary product of Confucian culture and very different from Confucianism itself. The production of 2-episode movie “Confucius” filmed in Hà Bắc in 2009 at a cost of up to 22 million USD is just another secondary product of “Confucian culture”, unlikely to reach higher “Confucianism level” ...

(*) Mahathir Mohamad, Davis Hitchcock, Tommy Koh, Francis Fukuyama, Dan Waters, Richard Robison, Chen Fenglin, Phan Ngọc. See: Hồ Sĩ Quý (2006). *The Value and Asian Values*. National Political Publishing House. Hanoi. p.120-172.

In fact, most products of Confucian culture being distributed widely on the market in the new globalization period are just products of consumption culture, some are not basic, some are secondary, and some can be imported



Confucius Institutes in Kalmykia (Russia), Jeju (Korea) and California (U.S)

and updated. At a more profound level, the penetration of Confucianism needs to be measured by comprehension, contemplation and practice of human values, besides the understanding (to some certain extent) of Confucius and Mencius' classic writings.

6. Thus, with the characteristic of encompassing life values, *human culture* under *Confucian worldviews* is what profoundly reflects the essence of Confucianism. Obviously, in reality, there are not many theories which can

have that profound penetration. Today, the calligraphies of *Humanity, Propriety, Righteousness, Wisdom, Trust*, Son Đông-branded restaurants, Confucian-styled temples appear more and more both in and outside China. However, Confucian human culture is still quite strange to Western young adults, and even equally strange to young adults born in the 80s and 90s in China and Vietnam.

III. Conclusion

In China today, the spiritual life of the society is in need of a theory which is profound, has indigenous origin, more suitable with the spirit of rising of Chinese civilization... to replace, fill the lacks or be a tool to solve ideology-spiritual problems. However, whether this need is real or virtual, of political institutions or public, is still debatable. The picture of a harmonious society and model of all generations is fading even in mainland China.

But if it is plausible reason, it does not matter how plausible it is, it is not an objective reason for Confucianism to resurrect, continue to develop and promote its effects as an internal factor in the development of Asian societies in this century. Like previous decades in Taiwan, Korea, Singapore or Hong Kong, Confucianism and Confucian culture still play its role and position naturally in life. They are products of life itself, preserved and maintained quietly in life without exaggerations,

and are easily taken advantage for the “China dream” conspiracies. And so, when necessary, they will take effect in accordance with apparent rule of life.

Basically, the fate of Confucianism in the 21st century is decided by the social life □

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