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WHY IS CONFUCIANISM NOT A RELIGION? THE IMPACT OF ORIENTALISM

by *Chen Na*

Abstract. This study attempts to answer the question why Confucianism, the dominant “teaching” among the Three Teachings, is not a religion in contemporary China, unlike the other two “teachings,” Buddhism and Daoism. By examining this phenomenon in the social-historical context, this study finds its origin in Orientalism. The Orientalist conceptualization of religion became part of the New Culture discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. While China

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has undergone tremendous social changes over the past century, the old discourse remains.

Keywords: China; Chinese religion; Confucianism; New Culture discourse; Orientalism; scientism

Religion in China is an issue of *problematique*. Over the past three decades there has accumulated a huge body of literature about how rapidly religions are reviving in post-Mao China and how hectically the government has been dealing with the unprecedented situation. Yet there is one particular feature in the baffling landscape of religion in China: Confucianism, the major tradition of the “Three Teachings,” is not treated as a religion. In 1982, the Chinese government promulgated a document on religious affairs entitled “The Basic Viewpoints and Policies on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period” (《关于我国社会主义时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策》). This document, known as “Document 19,” has since been the major official policy on religion in China, and lists five legally protected religions that are allowed to practice in China today—Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam (for an English translation, see MacInnis 1989, 8–26).

Because Article 36 of China’s Constitution grants Chinese citizens freedom of religious belief without specifying a limited group of religions, this gives rise to the question of what happens to all the other religions (MacInnis 1989, 34). In particular, it raises the question for this study: Given that Daoism and Buddhism are listed, why not Confucianism?

It is well known that in the Chinese religious tradition of “Three Teachings,” Confucianism has been the dominant “Teaching,” and Chinese culture is also called a Confucian culture. Meanwhile the other two Teachings, Buddhism and Daoism, did not come into being until the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Therefore they are latecomers in the long Chinese history of over four thousand years. Did these latecomers replace “earlier traditions” as happened in the development of Christianity in Europe? The “earlier tradition” does not consist of Confucianism alone. For example, *Daojia* (道家) was an important cultural element in the “earlier tradition” before *Daojiao* (道教) or Daoism was established as an institutionalized religion in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE). And the origins of the Confucian tradition did not start with Confucius (551–479 BCE) but may be traced all the way back to the early Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) or even earlier.

Later traditions did not replace earlier ones, but coexisted along with the dominant tradition of Confucianism for centuries with occasional friction or conflict. By the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), after a period of about one thousand years, the “Three Teachings” had absorbed many

key elements from each other, and they had gradually merged into a single system with Confucianism as the core, known as “Unity of the Three Teachings” (三教合一). Thus when “Confucianism” is used in a broad sense, it may stand as being synonymous with Chinese culture or Chinese tradition as a whole. Meanwhile, Confucianism may still stand by itself as one of the “Three Teachings” vis-à-vis Daoism and Buddhism. By common logic, therefore, Confucianism should not be denied a place in the list of the “legally protected religions” in China. But as a matter of fact, Confucianism has been deprived of such a position ever since the early twentieth century. This is a phenomenon of great significance, because it is not only a simple question of categorization but an issue that affects the lives of billions of people, an issue that shapes China’s sociocultural development, and an issue that defines Chinese cultural identity. Although this topic has been touched upon here and there by various scholars (e.g., Yang 1961), it has been generally neglected as a taken-for-granted norm for the whole century. Why?

The present study attempts to examine this phenomenon in its social-historical context so as to gain better understanding of both the background and process of how a certain concept of religion was developed and how it has impacted policy making and social life in China. Specifically, the paper unfolds in the following parts: the impact of scientism at the turn of the twentieth century, the power struggle in the East–West interaction, the communist movement and religious policy, the revival of religions and the dilemma of Confucianism, and the durability of the New Culture discourse. The paper concludes with a recapitulation of the analysis.

THE IMPACT OF SCIENTISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

For a long time before the Opium War of 1840, China as the “middle kingdom” was relatively isolated from the outside world, especially from the Christian world in the West. With the “Three Teachings” as the dominant tradition for personal cultivation and social stability, the Chinese sustained a self-sufficient civilization without much knowledge of “religion” as defined in the West. The limited contacts with the West, including Catholic missionary activities in China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties that resulted in the Chinese Rites Controversy, had little impact on China’s intellectual landscape. The Opium War changed history and dragged China onto the stage of the modern world.

During about half a century, the Chinese suffered from one defeat after another in fighting against the Western powers (later also Japan). The enormous losses included millions of square kilometers of annexed territory and astronomical amounts of cash (silver) as war indemnity, to say nothing about sovereignty and dignity. The nation was sinking ever

deeper into a crisis of life and death. For decades, the intellectual elites struggled to understand the unprecedented crisis and searched for ways of national salvation. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Yan Fu (严复 1853–1921), the most influential scholar and translator in China at the time, finally realized that

The ultimate source of Western power—of the difference between East and West—lies not merely in weapons and technology, not simply in economic or even political organization, or in any institutional arrangement. The ultimate source is an entirely different vision of reality. It is to be sought in the realm of ideas and values. (Schwartz 1964, 43)

The late nineteenth century ideology in the West was typically represented by social Darwinism (Olson 2008, chs. 8 and 9). By its nature, the core of social Darwinism is scientism, which “in general, assumes that all aspects of the universe are knowable through the methods of science,” be it in the study of nature or of human society (Kwok 1965, 3; for a different scientism see Hua 1995, 15). Yan Fu first introduced Darwin’s theory of “natural selection” in his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas H. Huxley. He skillfully translated *Evolution and Ethics* into *Tianyan Lun* (《天演论》), that is, *On Heavenly Evolution*, and “natural selection” into “*tianze*” (“天择”), that is, “heavenly selection.” Schwartz (1964, 96) also discusses Yan’s translation of “nature” as “tian” and found it acceptable and justifiable. I want to emphasize Yan’s “sanctification” of social Darwinism and its impact. Thus the “scientific theory” from the West was endorsed by *Tian* (天the Heaven), which in the Chinese cultural context stands not only for nature as an ecosystem but also for the absolute being in the universe with supernatural and judgmental power. Yan’s “cultural translation” was well received among Chinese intellectuals as a wholesale package, combining the imported message of social Darwinism and the embedded cultural connotation of absoluteness. While Europe saw the building up of the authority of modern science in the nineteenth century (Olson 2008, 2), the concept of science came to China with an even higher authoritative status and laid the foundation for the further development of scientism. Here I use the “concept of science” because the Chinese word “科学” was not widely used as the translation of “science” until 1905. (For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Jin and Liu 2010, ch. 12).

Yan’s *Tianyan Lun* (*Evolution and Ethics*, by Thomas H. Huxley) as well as his seven other translations such as *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith (1901) and *The Study of Sociology* by Herbert Spencer (1903), had tremendous influence among the intellectuals of the time and beyond. These intellectuals included earlier revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen and reformists such as Liang Qichao. In the discussion that follows, the focus is on the later generation of intellectuals of the New Culture movement. Very soon the word “science” became a term not only referring to a logic system

or method but a term equivalent to “correct,” “true,” and “just” (Jin and Liu 2010, 584). By the time of the New Culture movement, here taken to refer to the sociocultural movement that happened in China roughly from the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s, with the May 4th movement of 1919 understood as part of it, “science” had turned into the equivalent of “truth” and become an object of worship. Chen Duxiu (陈独秀 1879–1942), a Peking University professor and leader in the New Culture movement, seemed to take the stand of a martyr when he said

In order to uphold Mr. D (Democracy) and Mr. S (Science), Westerners had struggled hard and shed their blood. The two misters gradually redeemed themselves from the darkness. Now we must follow these two misters so that they may cure and save China from the darkness of politics, morality, academics, and ideas. In order to uphold these two misters, I am ready to challenge all the oppressions from the government and the attack and ridicule of society, and I am even ready to shed my blood and be beheaded. (Chen Duxiu 1990b, 72f).

Hu Shi (胡适 1891–1962), known as the most influential intellectual in twentieth-century China, was another New Culture leader. Hu’s 1923 description of “science” also reflected the social trend of early twentieth-century China:

Over the last thirty years, there is one word that has gained almost the supreme status of dignity and respectability throughout China. Neither those who understand it nor those who don’t, neither the conservatives nor the reformists, would dare to openly challenge it with an attitude of contempt or disrespect. This word is “Science.” (Hu 1991, 52)

The perspective of scientism is also well expressed in Yan Fu’s definition of sociology: “What is sociology? Sociology is using the rules and principles of science to examine the changes of people and society so as to understand the past and predict the future” (Yan 1981, vii). According to the social evolutionary theory accepted and spread by Yan, it is a “universal law” that the past and future of human society develops in a unilinear manner from lower to higher stages. This philosophy of history and the associated progressive worldview set the ideological background for the social movement in China at the turn of the century. Under this framework, the Western countries had already entered an advanced stage of society while traditional China was still in a backward stage. In order to promote social progress as well as to save a sinking China from its crisis, therefore, it would be necessary and well justified to criticize Chinese tradition and promote Westernization. With this in mind, one would not feel much surprised when LIN Yu-sheng raised the following issue:

One of the most striking and peculiar features of the intellectual history of twentieth-century China has been the emergence and persistence of

profoundly iconoclastic attitudes toward the cultural heritage of the Chinese past. (Lin 1979, 3)

In this quote Lin refers to both the New Cultural movement in early twentieth-century and Mao's Cultural Revolution half a century later. In my discussion here, I only focus on early twentieth-century and leave Mao for another time. In his further analysis of this historical phenomenon, Lin suggests an "underlying assumption of a wholesale transformation of the values and the spirit of the people. Such a transformation is further assumed to require a radical rejection of the prevailing traditions of the Chinese past" (Lin 1979, 4). This so-called "prevailing tradition of the Chinese past" is Confucianism in its broad sense. That the total rejection of Confucianism was the "fundamental prerequisite" for modernizing China was a consensus among the leading New Culture elites, such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun (鲁迅1881–1936) (Lin 1979, 9).

In retrospect, the major social movement in China in the early twentieth century was unfolded under strong influence of scientism, in particular the social evolution theory of social Darwinism. In the course of pushing China forward along the track of evolution, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown so as to make way for the Republic, and meanwhile the Confucian tradition, which is considered as the cultural foundation of the backward stage of society, was attacked with "totalistic cultural iconoclasm" (Lin Yu-sheng) so as to make room for the New Culture. In this sense, Confucianism is at once a funeral object (陪葬品) for the dead old era and a sacrifice offering (牺牲品) for the progressive new one.

POWER STRUGGLE IN THE EAST–WEST INTERACTION

Religion was an important topic in the New Culture movement. Based on his scientific perspective, Chen Duxiu (1990a, 43) advocated that all religions should be abolished or, for the sake of social evolution, religions should be replaced by science so as to develop a genuine belief among the people. In reality, however, religion was never abolished or replaced by science in China. For long time, nevertheless, the question remained about whether or not the traditional "Three Teachings" were considered three religions. In the "Constitution of the Republic of China" proclaimed on October 10, 1923, Article 12 reads:

A citizen of the Republic of China shall be free to honor Confucius and to profess any religion, such freedom shall not be restricted except in accordance with law. (Commission on Extraterritoriality 1967 [1924], 17).

Why does it distinguish between "honor[ing] Confucius" and "profess[ing] any religion"? Because Confucianism was not considered a religion. To a great extent, this is the result of the power struggle in the East–West interaction—the power struggle of the right of discourse. There

were a few cases of Christian contacts in China before the sixteenth century, for example during the Tang Dynasty and the Yuan Dynasty, but these did not last long nor leave much impact on Chinese history. Ever since the Western missionaries reached “pagan” China in the sixteenth century, there arose the issue of whether the Three Teachings should be considered as religions. Based on the exclusive doctrine of Christianity at the time, they were not religions. Although Matteo Ricci tried to take a more liberal or flexible attitude toward Chinese tradition, his opinion or rather strategy never prevailed in missionary circles (Spence 1985). As “religion” and “pagan” were words heavily loaded with connotations of morality, sin, civilization, enlightenment, and the like, the label of “no religion” was a very negative one. When that phase of East–West confrontation ended with the Chinese Rites Controversy in the early eighteenth century, it at least signified that China was still powerful enough to defend her own sovereignty as well as her right of discourse on Chinese cultural tradition.

The Opium War of 1840 changed the course of Chinese history. Accompanied by repeated defeats on the military battlefields, China also suffered immensely from significant defeats on the “battlefields” at the political and sociocultural fronts. Soon after the Opium War, China was forced to reopen to missionary religious groups from Western countries. The two forces from the West, military and religious, worked hand in hand and brought about a comprehensive conquest in China. For well over half a century, the Western powers would, on the one hand, fight each other for their respective interests in this ancient “oriental” country and, on the other hand, unite with each other in their practice of “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the [Far] Orient” (Said 1978, 3). For example, missionaries were involved in the development of China’s modern education, missionaries and Western companies started China’s first printing houses and newspapers. The Western lifestyle was first introduced to the coastal cities and gradually spread to the inland areas. With the ever expanding Western influence into various aspects of Chinese society—politics, economy, religion, education, mass media, cultural affairs, social life, and so on—the discourse of Orientalism had gained increasingly more acceptance and authority in China. Chinese tradition as a whole underwent a reexamination and redefinition through the lens of Orientalism.

The definition of religion in China is a typical case. The Chinese word “宗教” (“religion”) was a Japanese neologism crafted in Japan’s interaction with the West. The word was imported to China at the turn of the century and used to express Western notions that had not existed in Chinese discourse until then (Goossaert 2011). In the eyes of many Westerners, and missionaries in particular, the “Three Teachings” in Chinese tradition were no religion at all, as the definition of religion could only come from the European tradition of Christianity or Abrahamic monotheism. For

example, Yan Fu had to answer “the frequent missionary allegations that China simply had no religion” (Schwartz 1964, 38). Some others, who appeared to be less Eurocentric, may have taken a more inclusive definition about religion. But as Peter van der Veer (2001, 25) points out, “The recognition of a multiplicity of religions, however, in no way prevents the identification of the essence of religion with Christianity.” Following the social evolutionary theory popular at the time it was natural to identify “Christianity as the highest form or essence of religion,” (26) against which all the other religions were defined. Among the “Three Teachings,” Daoism and Buddhism were recognized as “institutionalized religions,” which share certain features of Christianity, and they were accepted as religions; meanwhile, Confucianism was considered as a noninstitutionalized religion or a diffused religion (see Yang 1961), with more different features from Christianity, and more often than not it was not accepted as a religion.

By the early twentieth century, the discourse of Orientalism had exerted tremendous influence on China’s intellectual community. For the intellectual elites at that time, including some leading figures of the social movements, much of the Orientalist conceptualization had already been internalized. For example, Sun Yat-sen, the Founding Father of the Republic of China, was a baptized Christian and a believer in social evolutionary theory. Like many other expressions of Orientalism, the definition of religion was a highly politicalized issue. In the same year of 1912, when the Republic of China was established, Emile Durkheim published *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 1995). According to the definition of religion as a “moral community” in this famous book, there is no doubt that Confucianism is a religion in its proper sense. Max Weber obviously agreed with Durkheim when he published one of his major books on religion called *The Religion of China* ([1920]1920), in which Confucianism was the first of the two major Chinese religions that Weber studied. That the authoritative academic opinions did not seem to matter in the Republic of China at the time reflects the underdevelopment of academia in China and also provides strong evidence to support Said’s argument that “Orientalism was itself a product of certain political forces and activities” (1978, 203). Considering the sociopolitical background and status of semi-feudal and semi-colonial China at the time, as discussed by Mao Zedong in his “On New Democracy” ([1940]1967a), which means that China still had much of her independence, the mechanism that led to the definition that Confucianism was not a religion would be the “latent Orientalism” that had already been internalized as part of the local intellectual discourse rather than a case of Western ideas imposed through coercion (Said 1978, 222).

Because Confucianism is the core of Chinese culture, when Confucianism was deprived of legal status as a religion a fundamental subversion of Chinese culture was created. Together, the New Culture “radical

anti-traditionalism” as an intellectual tradition and the Constitution of the Republic as a legal tradition exerted a tremendous impact on the development of Chinese sociocultural tradition and Chinese cultural identity. The specific effects of such impact would manifest again and again throughout the twentieth century.

THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT AND RELIGIOUS POLICY

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), established in 1921, was born during the heyday of the New Culture movement. Some of the “founding fathers” of the CCP were leading elites in the movement and many others close followers. Chen Duxiu was the general secretary of the CCP in its first years from 1921 to 1927. Mao Zedong, one of the younger founders of the CCP, was an enthusiast in the New Culture movement (see Snow 1968, 148). Marxism, which is the soul of the Communist Party, is a typically social evolutionary theory; it claims to be based on modern science and advocates a philosophy of history of unilinear development in scaled stages. In China, the road leading to the birth of the Communist Party was paved by this scientific discourse. As shown by the content analysis of the *New Youth* magazine, the word “kexue” (science) was used to refer to Marxism between 1918 and 1921. In the early years of the CCP, Marxism and Leninism were taken as equals to science and considered as peaks in the development of science (Jin and Liu 2010, 362). From its birth, therefore, the CCP had taken on the contemporary social ethos of scientism as its inherent heritage. What happened in the history of CCP development would be unavoidably affected by such a sociocultural background, which is embedded with elements of anti-traditionalism, social Darwinism and [latent] Orientalism. The point about Orientalism requires some subtle nuancing. In principle, the CCP takes a strong stance against the colonialism and imperialism that gave rise to Orientalism. But when it comes to latent Orientalism, that is, when some Orientalist concepts and ideas have penetrated deep into the Chinese culture and become an organic part of the intellectual and public discourse, it may be expected that the CCP and its leaders would follow the discourse without being conscious of the subtlety. Another point of concern is that Karl Marx did not develop a systematic theory of religion. His famous metaphor of religion as the opium of the people only reveals his atheist worldview and compassion for “the oppressed creature” in “a heartless world” (McKinnon 2005). Therefore, in the analysis of the religious policy and practice of the CCP, we can only resort to the general principle of communist theory while paying more attention to the sociocultural background of the CCP and its policy makers. With this in mind, it will be helpful for us to understand the following discussion.

Mao Zedong's understanding of religion is expressed in his various writings. His basic ideas follow the perspective of "science and progress" and social evolution theory, that is, religion is a product of the lower and backward stages of society and will disappear with the progress of society into a higher and more advanced stage. Alternately, if people can raise their consciousness to a higher level, they will dispel the backward ideas of religion. In his report on the peasant movement in 1927, Mao made the comment, "It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them" ([1927]1967b, 47). Mao was so confident about his conviction of the progressive evolution of society that at one occasion he proposed to have a contest between communism and other doctrines, including Buddhism, Christianity, and polytheism. "If communism is beaten, we Communists will admit defeat in good grace" (Mao [1940]1967a, 361).

Mao's confidence and perception about religion shows his strong ideological identification with communism. Communists anywhere in the world may share this feature. But in many detailed aspects, China's policy on religion has its own characteristics. In his study comparing religious policies in China and the former Soviet Union, Christopher Marsh (2011, 12) notes, "While China's policies across many issue areas took Soviet policy as their launching point, in the area of religion China continually showed itself to be more independent-minded." This is because, Marsh suggests, the quite different pre-communist religious traditions between the two countries, that is, Russia's exclusive and monotheistic traditions of Eastern Orthodox and Islam vs. China's nonexclusivistic tradition of the Three Teachings (2011, 13). This is of course a manifest difference between these two communist countries. But for the present study I want to emphasize a more latent aspect that contributes to certain Chinese characteristics in the CCP's religious policy and practice—the impact of China's modern history (since the Opium War) on the mindset of the CCP, that is, the inherent heritage derived from the New Culture movement and the latent Orientalism built up during the semi-feudal and semi-colonial period.

In 1954, communist China promulgated her first constitution, of which Article 88 states: Every citizen of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of religious belief (MacInnis 1972, 21). Compared with the similar article in the 1923 Constitution quoted above, this article makes no distinction between Confucius (or Confucianism) and other religions, and seems to be more inclusive. But this is not true. The basic attitude of the 1954 Constitution is that Confucianism is not considered as a religion at all nor should Confucius be honored; instead, both of them should be denounced and trashed together with the political and sociocultural system of the old society. Meanwhile, the other two isms of the Three Teachings, Daoism and Buddhism, were ranked as religions by law. This is, no doubt,

a combination of the New Culture mentality of radical anti-traditionalism and social evolutionism along the lines of Marxist historical materialism. In practice, the Confucian tradition, including beliefs in some folk religious cults, observation of certain traditional festivals and rituals, etc., was considered backward ideology and labeled as feudalist superstition. Like the word “religion” (“宗教”), the word “superstition” (“迷信”) in modern Chinese was also an imported Japanese neologism from the turn of the twentieth century (Goossaert 2011, 172–90; Jin and Liu 2010, 591f.). Although the Chinese word “迷信” (*mixin*) is sometimes literally translated back into English as “blind faith,” its origin is from superstition and so is its basic meaning. It used to be a word in the Christian tradition referring to non-Christian beliefs and practices. However, when it was adopted in the Chinese language, its connotation further developed. In its basic meaning, it refers to beliefs and practices so low on the evolutionary scale of religion that they cannot be counted as religion at all. In his 1913 article on “heavenly evolution,” Yan Fu discussed the relationship between science, religion, and superstition. Yan argued that religion is associated with science, so that the more science is developed the more religion is refined, but superstition has nothing to do with science. Yan stressed that one must not confuse religion and superstition (Jin and Liu, 2010, 591). Under the framework of social evolutionism, superstition belongs to a backward trend that goes against the progressive development of society. To solve this problem, the CCP resorted to its major weapon of education—to educate the people to raise their political consciousness so as to get rid of the feudalist superstition. For historical reasons, certain folk religion cults, such as Yiguan Dao (一贯道), which sided with the Japanese during the anti-Japanese war, were labeled as groups of reactionary feudalist superstition, and leaders in these groups were taken as counterrevolutionaries and punished by law. Some folk religion practitioners were accused of swindling money from people and they were also punished (see Document 28. “Ya Han-chang: On the Questions of Religious Superstition”, in MacInnis, 1972, 37–42).

In order to educate people, scholars and government officials in charge of religious affairs published articles on religious theory and practice. The most important and illuminating articles were a series that appeared between 1963 and 1965 in some of the most prominent journals and newspapers in China (MacInnis 1972, 35–89). Other media such as radio were also used as propaganda against superstition (MacInnis 1972, 176–93). In the Campaign of Socialist Education (1963–1966, also known as the Four Cleans Movement), it was part of the campaign goal to educate people to do away with feudalist superstition. When the Cultural Revolution started, however, the Red Guards waged a comprehensive war against all beliefs and practices of “superstitions” or religions, legal or illegal, with coercion and violence.

Now it is said that the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a nightmare. But what happened when the People's Republic awakened from that nightmare?

THE REVIVAL OF RELIGION AND THE DILEMMA OF CONFUCIANISM

The post-Mao reform tried to correct the mistakes of the Cultural Revolution and take a more open attitude towards religion. A 1979 document of the National Congress of the CCP stated:

The religious question can never be solved by means of a few political movements or administrative decrees. We can rely only on persuasion and education to deal with ideological issues, not mandatory decrees, only the democratic method, not force or dictatorship. (Document 2 in MacInnis 1989, 30)

Churches, mosques and temples began to reopen in 1979. Both the revised Constitution of 1982 and Document 19 reconfirmed the policy of freedom of religious belief. But looking into the details, it can be seen that religious policy still followed the track of the New Culture tradition. In order to carry out the policy, the CCP document stated “we must distinguish religion from feudal superstition. By religion, we chiefly mean worldwide religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and the like” (Document 3 Religious and Feudal Superstition, in MacInnis 1989, 33). Of course, “the like” does not include Confucianism. Instead, many ideas and practices of Confucianism would be ranked as feudal superstition. These are related to two kinds of problems. One refers to activities that swindle money and hurt people's mental or physical health, which “must be suppressed.” The other refers to “activities such as ancestor worship and belief in ghosts and deities,” which should be solved “by patient persuasion and lasting education in science, culture, and atheism” (MacInnis 1989, 34). In real life, however, the handling of the superstition problem occurs at the discretion of local officials. The distinction between the two kinds of superstition is not always a simple issue of black and white. Even if one's activity belongs to the “benign” second kind of superstition, it is still considered very negatively as something that should be gotten rid of. This casts a long shadow over the post-Mao sociocultural development, especially the revival of Confucianism.

As the core of traditional Chinese culture for thousands of years, Confucianism has been diffused throughout every aspect of Chinese society. It is no exaggeration to say that Confucianism is programmed deeply into the genes of Chinese culture. As Tu Weiming (1990, 136) has pointed out, despite negations and suppressions over the past century “Confucianism is still an integral part of the ‘psycho-cultural construct’ of the

contemporary Chinese intellectual as well as the Chinese peasant; it remains a defining characteristic of the Chinese mentality.” It is only natural that when the post-Mao reform adjusted the official discourse and relieved political pressures, the revival of Confucianism started spontaneously from the grassroots level and gradually expanded into an overwhelming trend all over China, as I will argue in my forthcoming “Revival of Confucianism and Reconstruction of Chinese Identity.” But due to the “illegitimate status” of Confucianism under the current laws and regulations, the revival of Confucianism has met with all kinds of complexities. Here are a few examples.

China’s reform started in the rural areas. Within a few years, peasants’ lives were improved, and they resumed traditional temple festivals to celebrate their new life and to pray for blessings. Such celebrations of Confucian tradition, which had stopped for decades, created tensions or conflicts between the authorities and peasants in many places. There were cases, though rare, in which the authorities used violence. In the Lihu area of Hebei province, the local police once fired gunshots into the air in an attempt to stop a mass temple festival in the mid-1980s (Yue 2004). Though the celebration carried on uninterrupted, people were under extremely high pressure. However, during the past ten or more years, all temple festivals are celebrated with direct or indirect support from the authorities, in the name of carrying on the cultural heritage.

In order to enrich cultural life, some government officials tried to explore local art traditions. In the suburbs of Beijing, for example, Hongsi Village and the surrounding area used to have well-developed pilgrim societies (*xianghui* 香会) that would give performances at community rituals. These societies, which had been banned even before the Cultural Revolution, were asked to reorganize and continue the century-old tradition of art performances. But the organization was renamed as “Flower Society” (*huahui* 花会), a neutral name with no religious connotation (Fan and Chen 2015). This is only a strategy to cope with the issue of the legitimacy of Confucian tradition.

People in other places also adopted similar strategies. Southern Zhejiang province is a region with very deep family traditions. In our fieldwork in Cangnan, we visited the Chen family that has a lineage history of almost a thousand years, encompassing twenty-six generations. In their village, an ancestry hall was built during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1661–1722). In 1949, the activities of the temple and lineage were stopped. In 1962 the temple was converted into a local school. Ten years ago, the ancestry hall was rebuilt on the original spot. The ancestor’s portrait and many name tablets were placed in the hall and annual activities resumed. In the front of the building, however, was a signboard with the words “The Association of the Elderly People in Chen Village,” which functioned as a compromise with the local officials (Fan, Chen, and Madsen 2015).

Everywhere in China, one sees the revival of Confucianism. But more often than not people involved would claim to be dealing with cultural heritage rather than Confucianism or try to find other excuses so as to avoid the labels of superstition or feudalist dregs. A subtle change has occurred in recent years, especially since President Xi Jinping came to office in 2013. As part of his grand vision of China's renaissance, Xi openly advocates the revival of Confucian tradition, which, as a tradition that values tolerance and harmony, would make significant contributions both to China and the world. Frequently Xi quotes from Confucius in his speeches at home and abroad; soon after his inauguration, he paid a visit to Qufu, Confucius' birthplace and hometown, and in 2014 he personally delivered a speech at the ceremony in celebration of Confucius' 2,565th birthday. Xi's pro-Confucius attitude has had a great impact on the new surge in the nationwide revival of Confucianism (see Chen Na, forthcoming).

It may seem ironic that, even with the personal support of the top leader of the party state, the ongoing revival of Confucianism is carried out in a greyish area. In fact, all the laws and regulations negatively related to Confucianism still stand, including the label of feudalist superstition, and there has not been an official political rehabilitation of Confucius. There are still people who openly challenge the justification of the Confucian revival. For example, there is a group of Chinese intellectuals, identified with the organization "Wuyouzhixiang" ("乌有之乡", that is, "Utopia"), who cherish a strong positive identification with the Maoism of the Cultural Revolution. An interesting thing happened in January 2011 when a huge bronze statue of Confucius was placed in front of the newly renovated National Museum of China next to Tiananmen Square. It caused some sensation both in China and abroad. After 100 days, however, the statue was quietly removed from this politically sensitive spot without any explanation (<http://news.163.com/11/0425/03/72F4GP6J00014AED.html>, accessed January 22, 2015).

In the face of this confusing dilemma, one cannot help but ask: Is there really a historical curse on Confucianism?

ON THE DURABILITY OF THE NEW CULTURE DISCOURSE

Yes, there does exist such a curse, that is, the New Culture movement mentality and the related discourse. Our analysis above has traced its roots to scientism and Orientalism. But the question now is why the New Culture mentality and the related discourse have lasted so long, even with all the resistance and counteractions over the last thirty years. I will try to answer this question by making three points.

The first answer is the power of discourse. A certain mentality and its related discourse are integrated and mutually supportive. While mentality may be abstract and intangible, discourse is specific and palpable. An analysis of the power of the discourse will explain the power of both. According to Foucault (1972), discourse is power that is diffused everywhere in society. The particular power of the New Culture discourse is mainly from the West, which had overwhelmed China with irresistible power on both military and nonmilitary battlefields. The basic idea of the discourse is social evolutionism, which was imported from the West. As building blocks of the discourse, many concepts were imported from the West. The intellectual elites leading the New Culture movement were educated in the West. The battle cry of their movement, “Science and Democracy”, is from the West. After all, the West means progressive, advanced, and power itself.

Of particular significance is the historicity (历史性的) of the New Culture discourse, which was constructed over a period of decades, when China had been paying an unimaginably high cost to make the turn from the millennia-old tradition to modernity. I take this period from around 1890 to 1925. Chang Hao (1971) suggests that the period from 1890 to 1910 is more important than the May 4th New Culture period as the divide marking China’s intellectual transition. I think the two periods put together is when the New Culture discourse was developed. The New Culture discourse was both a product of the historical turning, and it also contributed to the historical turning. As a result, it has become an organic part of this particular history and gained the character of historical inevitability, that is, so far as China was moving along the course of modernization there was the justification to uphold the New Culture discourse in one way or another. This made the power of the New Culture discourse unusually durable and lasting.

A tricky part of the discourse construction is that many elements in the New Culture discourse were constructs of colonialism and imperialism. As discussed above, the New Culture understanding and definition of “religion” and “superstition” were typically Orientalist and based on Eurocentrism. But once established, Orientalism, and especially latent Orientalism, would find an independent life in and of itself with a strong resistance to change, even after the contexts that gave birth to it had long gone. As Said says:

But like all enunciative capacities and the discourses they enable, latent Orientalism was profoundly conservative—dedicated, that is, to its self-preservation. Transmitted from one generation to another, it was a part of the culture, as much a language about a part of reality as geometry or physics. Orientalism staked its existence, not upon its openness, its receptivity to the Orient, but rather on its internal, repetitious consistency about its constitutive will-to-power over the Orient. In such a way Orientalism was

able to survive revolutions, world wars, and the literal dismemberment of empire. (Said 1978, 222)

The New Culture discourse is a typical case that has survived “revolutions, world wars, and the literal dismemberment of empire.” But the tenacity of the Orientalist discourse alone would be an insufficient explanation to the main question of this study, especially when we take into consideration sea changes in international discourse since the postcolonial era.

In his discussion of the Orientalist discourse, Peter van der Veer contests Said’s argument, saying it “portrays the production of knowledge about the Orient as an exclusively Western affair. . . . It would be a serious mistake to deny agency to the colonized in our effort to show the force of colonial discourse” (Van der Veer 1993, 23). Van der Veer’s arguments emphasize the undeniable role of the colonized in the creation and survival of Orientalist discourse. The same holds true in understanding the lasting durability of the Orientalist discourse in China. Specifically we will look into two aspects: Chinese academics and China’s official ideology.

The second answer is Chinese academics. By its nature the New Culture discourse belongs to what Foucault calls “power/knowledge,” which is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and “truth.” Academic research and professional discourse play an essential role in the building up as well as the further development of “power/knowledge.” Both the construction and deconstruction of Orientalism in the West were closely related to the development of academics. In particular, it would be impossible for Orientalism to decline without academic and professional research in decolonization. In the case of China, the twentieth century saw an underdevelopment of academics, especially in the social sciences. After the “power/knowledge” of New Culture discourse was built up with imported concepts and ideas, there had been little, if any, academic research to challenge it. A trace of China’s history of academic development in broad outline will help understand why and how the New Culture discourse could last so long unchallenged in China. Our focus will be on social sciences, which are more closely linked to our question.

- (1) Though China had developed a rich heritage of traditional scholarship, China did not have a modern social science of its own at the turn of the twentieth century. That is why China had to import concepts, such as evolution, religion, and superstition. (For a systematic analysis of hundreds of new concepts imported or developed at the turn of the twentieth century, see Jin and Liu, 2010). The New Culture discourse mainly reflected Western academic thinking and sociopolitical discourse of the late nineteenth century. This discourse dominated academic and sociopolitical arenas

in the post-Qing Dynasty China. The Orientalist elements embedded in the discourse became taken-for-granted “truth,” or in Bourdieu’s expression “doxa.”

- (2) The first half of the twentieth century in China began with the Boxer Rebellion, and it ended with the victory of the CCP in the civil war. In between, the country suffered uninterrupted invasions, wars, revolutions, and disasters. Under such circumstances, China had only developed very limited modern social sciences in the first half of the century. Meanwhile, two generations of Chinese intellectuals during this period were under the strong influence of New Culture mentality and formed an intellectual tradition.
- (3) The CCP came to power in 1949. In 1952, however, the authorities took an unusual move and shut down several academic disciplines at higher education institutions nationwide, including sociology, anthropology, and political science. Why? Because China was following the Soviet Union’s model of higher education. Ironically, when the Soviet Union started to restore its programs of sociology and other disciplines in 1956, China did not follow suit (Lu Xueyi 2010).
- (4) China under Maoism carried out one political mass movement after another until the end of the Cultural Revolution. Serious social science research became a taboo. Meanwhile, Mao’s China became isolated from the rest of the world and there was practically no academic exchange in the social sciences with the international community until the 1980s. As a result, communist China under Mao was extremely weak in social science education and research.
- (5) The post-Mao reform restored social science studies and reopened China to global academic communities. It has taken a long time for Chinese intellectuals to swallow and digest the glut of information from outside, not to mention catching up with international academic trends. In a very real sense, this process is still going on today. As the reform has brought about drastic societal transformations accompanied by endless sociocultural problems, much of China’s social science research is focused on contemporary issues. So far, very limited research has been conducted on colonialism in China and especially on the area of decolonization.

To sum up, there has not yet developed a power in academic and intellectual circles that could challenge the Orientalist elements embedded in the New Culture discourse.

The third answer is China’s official ideology. China’s official ideology, communism, is based on Marxian historical materialism, which was

developed in mid and late nineteenth-century Europe. By its nature, communism is a social evolutionary theory that advocates a human history of unilinear development in escalating stages. The strong conviction in social progressivism and scientism embedded in communist theory corresponds with the basic ideas of the New Culture mentality. The CCP has always cherished the New Culture as a revolutionary tradition. For decades, the CCP and its leaders have proclaimed that they are leading the Chinese people who are marching progressively toward a higher stage of society (Mao [1939]1967c). In the political discourse of the CCP, science and progress are valued as among the most positive elements in social development. It is from such an all-embracing ideology as its fundamental guidance that the CCP finds its justification for all its policies, strategies, and actions.

Within this ideological framework, it is difficult to take a critical look at the New Culture tradition. It would be even more difficult when the ideas in question have been imported and internalized as “truth.” In his discussion on the development of China’s national culture, Mao pointed out “To advocate ‘wholesale Westernization’ is wrong.” At the same time, Mao said, “To nourish her own culture China needs to assimilate a good deal of foreign progressive culture, not enough of which was done in the past” (Mao [1940]1967a, 380). In fact many imported concepts were treated as ideas from “foreign progressive culture” and internalized without much critique. But what Mao might not have known was that in the twentieth century Western intellectuals have been critical of their own traditions, especially in the decolonization movement after the end of WWII when many concepts of the late nineteenth century have been reexamined and revalued as self-serving ideas formulated to justify colonization at that time. Said is but one example of the many scholars who worked hard to criticize the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition, which, in principle, was along the same track of the CCP’s political line against colonialism and imperialism. But it seems the ideas raised by Said and others has never entered the horizon of Mao and his colleagues.

Even when the post-Mao reform deviated from Maoism, it was mainly shifting from Mao’s focus on class struggle and continued revolution to a more pragmatic focus on economic development; it was not deviating from the official ideology of the CCP. This explains why, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the basic understanding of religion in government policies and regulations continued to follow the New Culture discourse, which presumes Confucianism as nonreligion and many of the beliefs and practices of Confucianism as superstition.

In the course of the post-Mao reform, one prominent social trend is the revival of Confucianism. Maybe because of the ever-growing cultural consciousness in the globalizing age, Chinese people are increasingly more identified with the Confucian tradition. This has created a tension between the official ideology and the social reality. Over the last three years, Xi

Jinping, the president of the party state, has been personally promoting the revival of Confucian tradition. This has not only intensified existent tensions but led to an open contradiction between the official ideology and the official discourse with regard to Confucianism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct a deep analysis of this phenomenon. But one thing is certain: that such contradiction must lead to a solution sooner or later.

CONCLUSION

When we raised the issue at the beginning of this paper, it seemed that we are dealing with a question of definition, that is, to define “religion” and “superstition” in regard to Confucianism. It would not be so difficult if only we could find ready answers to the question. For example, Clifford Geertz’s description of religion as a “cultural system” (Geertz 1973) is a widely accepted standard for the definition of religion in the field of religious studies today, based on which Confucianism should be readily recognized as a religion just like the other two isms of Buddhism and Daoism. According to the entry on “superstition” in the 15th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2011), “one person’s religion is another one’s superstition . . . all religious beliefs and practices may seem superstitious to the person without religion.” Hence, there would be no point to label certain beliefs and practices of Confucianism as superstition and try to get rid of them, while setting up laws and regulations to safeguard the beliefs and practices of “other isms.”

But when we traced the origin of the issue, we found that it is a century-old question of certain imported concepts that were assimilated by Chinese intellectual elites one hundred years ago to build up the New Culture discourse. This discourse played an important role in the historical turn of China from traditional dynasty to modern republic. It is a discourse associated with the ideas of progressivism, evolutionism, and scientism, and has been cherished as an important tradition of revolution. But it seems that this discourse has never been considered in China as something associated with Orientalism. Now, in its “place of origin,” old conceptualizations such as the definition of religion have been critically reexamined and negated as serving colonialism and imperialism. But in China Orientalism seems to be a very foreign idea just as the century-old concept of religion is still being treated as taken-for-granted “truth.” Is it just a joke of history—an anachronism with cross-cultural localities?

However, when we take a more holistic approach and observe the issue in the more comprehensive contexts of China’s political and sociocultural history, we find it is not only a simple anachronism but an issue deeply involved with what Foucault calls “regime of truth.” When the New Culture discourse, grounded upon social evolutionism and with a (latent) label of modernity, merged with the communist discourse that represented the

official ideology of China, it gained tremendous power as an organic part of the regime of truth. Once established, the regime of truth becomes “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and functioning of statements” in society (Foucault 1980, 133). On the other hand, once established, the regime of truth gains its own life and vitality with its own self-fulfilling logic, as truth is linked “by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (Foucault 1980, 133). It is this kind of power that has made the law/policy makers in China make their contradictory legal statements, as if they were enchanted by “blind faith.” It is this kind of power that has made the Chinese, from the grassroots commoners to the president, feel as if they lack a full justification when they try to reach out for their identity in the Confucian tradition.

“Each society has its regime of truth” (Foucault 1980, 131). Accordingly, any major social transformation involves the reconstruction of its regime of truth. Just as it happened in China one century ago, the post-Mao reform today has brought about drastic societal transformations as well as the reconstruction of the regime of truth in China. The regime of truth is like a huge entanglement of countless pieces, of which the reconstruction is a long-term and complicated process. This paper is but an attempt to understand one small piece within that complex entanglement.

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