Religion in the Age of Transformation

Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies

Joseph B. Tamney and Linda Hsueh-Ling Chiang

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Preface

There are two broad reasons to be interested in this book. The first reason has to do with the ever-increasing importance of Chinese people around the globe and of mainland China in particular. To understand these people and their institutions, we must know their culture, and for some two thousand years Confucianism has been a basic part of that culture. Most essays or books about Confucianism are misleading because they tend to present Confucianism as it was, not as it is, or rather not as it is in the process of becoming. This scholarly tradition can usefully be understood only as in transition. Such is our perspective.

The second reason for reading this book is to learn about how all religions and moralities are changing. The questions we pose are stated in terms of Confucianism. As societies modernize, how are the guardians of the scholarly tradition changing its meaning in order to maintain its relevance? How are governments using Confucianism to suit political purposes? How is Confucianism being treated by artists, and how is the development of the entertainment industry affecting the scholarly tradition? How is Confucianism being challenged by new social movements such as the women's movement? Finally, as the world becomes more integrated, how well will Confucianism be able to fend off its competitors? Although we have written mainly about a single great tradition, the questions we pose are applicable to all the world's ideologies, and the answers arrived at regarding Confucianism have relevance for your favorite among them, no matter what it is.

For the transcription of Chinese names, we have used the pinyin system because it is more widely used than the Wade-Giles alternative. When discussing famous Chinese people, the Wade-Giles version of the name is presented in parentheses. In references to other people's works, we used the authors' names as they appeared in the cited works.

This book is about mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. Politics, artistic and popular cultures, gender roles, and the religious composition of Chinese societies are discussed—all with the goal of understanding how the fundamental social changes occurring in these societies are affecting Confucianism. We have tried to present the big picture. We thank in advance those who correct our interpretation and amplify our analysis.

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Both of us have traveled many times to the region discussed in this book. Linda was born in Taiwan. She frequently visits family, friends, and colleagues there. Joseph worked in Singapore from 1968 through 1971 and has often returned to see friends and colleagues. Linda is thankful for the financial help she received from Anderson University who made it possible for her to visit Hong Kong and Singapore several times. A travel grant from the Indiana University East Asia program allowed Linda to use the university's resources on the Bloomington campus. Thomas Lee at Indiana University was especially helpful. Both the Department of Chinese Studies and the Center for Advanced Studies at the National University of Singapore gave Joseph an academic home during recent visits to Singapore.

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Contents

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A Brief Overview of the History of Confucianism from the Perspective of Modernization Theory

In this chapter, we introduce the reader to Confucianism. As with all important ideologies, as times changed, so did the understanding of what was meant by "Confucianism." In discussing this process of social change and ideological accommodation, we use the basic theoretical tool of our analysis, modernization theory. Thus we discuss different phases of modernization—premodern, Western modern, and late-Western modern—and what occurred in China during these periods.

CONFUCIANISM

This name was given by Westerners to a large body of scholarly works, which the Chinese refer to as "the scholarly tradition." The most important book in this tradition is *The Analects* (*Lun Yü*), which is thought to contain the teaching of Confucius. The name "Confucius" is the Latinized version of Kung Fuzi (i.e., Master Kung), who was a teacher in China (c. 551–479 B.C.E.). *The Analects* is a collection of short dialogues and anecdotes involving Master Kung and his disciples, the Master and rulers, or just the disciples.

It was compiled by his students, or by the students of his students, in the century after his death. And it reads that way. It feels exactly as if a group of eager students sat down over rice wine one evening, taxed their memories, and started exchanging stories of the great things their teacher had said. Sometimes, the *Lun Yü* moves logically from one topic to the next; sometimes, completely new subjects suddenly pop up in the middle of a chapter. Some

anecdotes start and never end. There's a lot of repetition, and some key transitional sections seem to have been lost somehow over the centuries. (Reid 1999:97–98).

Brooks and Brooks (1998) published a new version of *The Analects* in which the chapters are ordered according to the periods in which the Brookses believe they were written. For example, their version begins with what is Chapter Four in the standard edition. The Brookses' version presents *The Analects* as "series of texts of different date, containing a few sayings that may go back to the historical Confucius, along with many others that were added in the next two centuries by his succors in what gradually became the Confucian school" (p. 1). The Brookses' version is controversial (Allen 1999). However their work reflects two widely accepted ideas: *The Analects* was not compiled entirely in one historical period, and what are probably later additions show the influence of other schools of thought, such as Daoism (Leys 1997:206).[1]

Anyone can find in *The Analects* pithy sayings that are timeless in their appropriateness. A disciple asked the Master, "Is there any single word that could guide one's entire life?" and Confucius replied, "Should it not be reciprocity? What you do not wish for yourself, you do not do to others" (15.24).[2] "The Master said: 'Don't worry if people don't recognize your merits, worry that you may not recognize theirs'" (1.16). A little humility is a good thing. Of course, this advice is also an illustration of the self-effacement of virtuous people; they can see what others are really like and who are truly worthy of praise because they do not get absorbed in themselves.

The Analects expresses a basic wisdom that is the fruit of experience anywhere.

> There was a time when I used to listen to what people said and trusted that they would act accordingly, but now I listen to what they say and watch what they do. (5.10)
>
> A gentleman does not approve of a person because he expressed a certain opinion, nor does he reject an opinion because it is expressed by a certain person. (15.23)

Chichung Huang translated Chapter 6.18 as follows, adding his own notes to the text.

> The Master said: 'When simplicity[1] surpasses refinement,[2] one is a rustic;[3] when refinement surpasses simplicity, one is a scribe.[4] Only when refinement and simplicity are well blended can one become a gentlemen.'[5]

1. I.e., native goodness of heart.

2. I.e., the acquisition and application of the rituals.
3. A metaphor representing a man who possesses native goodness of heart but little accomplishment in the rituals.
4. An auxiliary functionary in charge of official documents, a metaphor representing a man conversant with the formalities of the rituals but deficient in native goodness of heart.
5. This chapter discusses the constant mean between simplicity and refinement in the composition of a gentleman. (1997:83)

This quote illustrates the need to read *The Analects* with the help of scholarly annotation. It also contains several basic Confucian ideas: the innate goodness of people, the need for being socialized into social customs, and the ideal of balance, of combining opposites.

Confucius belonged to the lowest aristocratic stratum of his time, the "knights." Society was changing, and members of this status group were entering into administrative positions. Eventually they became a group defined by their scholarship. Thus *shi* has been translated as "knights" (which Leys calls "an *antiquated* anachronism") and as "scholars" ("a *modernistic* anachronism"). Several hundred years after Confucius lived, a scholarly status group did exist. They formed the bureaucracy that governed China for two millennia and that was more or less guided by the Confucian notion of "the classical figure of the 'intellectual' vested with ethical responsibilities and a political mission" (Leys 1997:133).

Confucius became revered as the great teacher. While it is true that Confucius spent a great deal of time educating his disciples, what he wanted to do is get involved in politics. *The Analects*, more than anything else, is a guide for political rulers.

> He spent virtually his entire life wandering from state to state, in the hope of finding an enlightened ruler who would at last give him a chance, and employ him and his team—who would entrust him with a territory, however small, where he might establish a model government. All his efforts were in vain. (Leys 1997:xxiii)

But "the tragic reality of Confucius as a failed politician was replaced by the glorious myth of Confucius the Supreme Teacher" (p. xxiv).

What distinguished Confucius as a political adviser was his fundamental belief that social order depended on the ethical correctness of the people, but especially of the rulers. As a result, *The Analects* is more about what is right behavior than how to administer a government. But what is right behavior is not naturally known nor obvious. People must be educated to discern what is correct. The linkage of education, morality, and political power is at the core of Confucianism.

What makes Confucius's comments seem not out of date is his concern for what we are like inside: "The Master said: 'Do not worry if you are without a position; worry lest you do not deserve a position. Do not worry if you are not famous; worry lest you do not deserve to be famous'" (4.14). Confucians value self-cultivation. Each person must continually improve by learning how to better carry out duties so as to advance society. By and large, Confucianists do not consider human nature as inclined to evil; rather, each of us just needs the right education to achieve wisdom, when we spontaneously enact *ren* or humanness. Self-cultivation does not depend on divine grace but self-disciplined study. The wise person is courteous, considerate, avoids extremes (such as by neither craving luxury nor practicing asceticism) and follows the aforementioned "golden rule" of reciprocity (15:24).

Confucianism presents the individual not as a detached entity but always as part of human relationships. In each relationship, both parties have obligations. For instance, the father should be kind, furnish security, and provide education. The son should be respectful, obedient, and care for his father in old age. Two groups are especially important: the family and the state. Moreover their fate is inseparable because family life is the foundation of the state.

> Master You said: "A man who respects his parents and his elders would hardly be inclined to defy his superiors. A man who is not inclined to defy his superiors will never foment a rebellion. A gentleman works at the root. Once the root is secured, the Way unfolds. To respect parents and elders is the root of humanity." (l. 2)

Master You was one of Confucius's disciples, several of whom are quoted in *The Analects*. This segment expresses "what later became the standard Confucius view that the political virtues of obedience and loyalty are family virtues writ large" (Dawson 1993:83). Within Confucianism, the family is the most important institution. Ideally, a child learns to respect parents, and this attitude is transferred to all authority figures subsequently encountered.

Social order also depends on maintaining traditions. Ideally everyone remains in the same status and is committed to retaining the traditional relationships among existing statuses. Order is maintained by *li* (i.e., by each person acting with propriety). Chinese have focused on proper behavior more than on correct ideas: orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. *Li* is translated as rites or rituals but can have a broader meaning in the scholarly tradition. *Li* "covers two activities that most contemporary Westerners think are quite different. One activity is solemn, explicit religious activities such as baptismal services. The other activity, however, is what we call etiquette or, more accurately, those

reasonable and humane learned conventions that make up the ethos of a culture" (Yearley 1996:7). Thus *li* has been a major part of Confucianism: to be civilized is to perform the required rituals and the established etiquette (Cohen 1994:92).

At times, Confucius referred to *li* and music, and indeed it would be more accurate to refer to this pair as the foundation of a civilization. However it must be kept in mind that in the scholarly tradition, music meant the equivalent of what Westerners call "classical music." Music was to order a person's feelings so as to create inner harmony (Huang 1997:50). So, it could be said that being civilized means carrying out one's roles correctly, conforming to the established norms, and appreciatively listening to classical music.

The Analects contains frequent references to the "Three Dynasties"—the legendary Xia, the Shang (ca 1751–1045 B.C.E.), and the Zhou (1045–249 B.C.E.). Confucius lived during the lengthy period when the Zhou emperors lost control and China disintegrated into warring states. He looked back to the early Zhou period as a golden age, when China was ordered by sagely emperors. Thus the scholarly tradition finds its ultimate sources in poetry, ritual guides, government decrees, and historical documents mainly from the Zhou dynasty period.

Confucius saw himself as transmitting a tradition, although he did make important changes as well. For example:

> The earliest parts of the *Analects* are the earliest writings emanating from Chinese civilization which deal primarily with ethical matters for their own sake and feature man's inclination to act for ethical reasons rather than for reasons of practical advantage. This is an important breakthrough in the history of Chinese thought. (Dawson 1993:xiii)

The Analects is a book about the importance of virtue. It is not an ethical treatise; the authors do not develop principles of right and wrong behavior, such as a theory of a just war.

Is Confucianism a Religion?

As Julia Ching wrote, "My definition of religion . . . focuses on a consciousness of a transcendent dimension, and I perceive it as present in Confucianism from the very beginning" (1993:84). Confucius did advocate compliance with religious rituals then in place. For example: "However coarse the fare, one should pray before every meal, and pray devoutly" (10.11). Moreover, *The Analects* contain many references to "Heaven." For example, there are references to *de* (virtue), which is bestowed by Heaven. Interestingly the Chinese term *de* originally denoted spiritual or magical power; Confucius turned it into an ethical

concept, while retaining the belief that virtue is Heaven sent. *The Analects* also refers at times to an impersonal fate or destiny (*ming*) (Dawson 1993:xxi, xxvi).

However, one can also answer the question—Is Confucianism a religion?—negatively. Confucius remained silent on sacred matters, such as the nature of the afterlife (5.13). He proposed no new gods, nor did he practice new ways of achieving salvation from daily life. *The Analects* only marginally concerns either the sacred or the afterlife.

What Dawson described as "this simple statement of Master Kung's humanism" (1993:95) reads as follows:

> Zilu asked how to serve the spirits and gods. The Master said: "You are not able to serve men, how could you serve the spirits?"
>
> Zilu said: "May I ask about death?" The Master said: "You do not know life, how could you know death?" (11.12)

This often quoted chapter supposedly means we should concentrate on this life.

However, even humanism, although substantively not a religion, can function as a religion. If a primary reason for people to be religious is to find a way to peacefully accept death, then Confucianism could be a functional alternative to religion by encouraging scholars to transcend death through public service or by preserving the Confucian legacy (Tamney 1988:126). In such ways, people may live on through their contributions to humanity. The Ming dynasty scholar Wang Yangming (1472–1529) wrote, "We Confucians also have our own doctrine of immortality. Yanzi died at the age of thirty-two, and yet he lives today" (quoted in Ching 1973:5). That is: The ideas of Confucius's favorite disciple, Yanzi, remain alive. The Confucianist's commitment to educating children is so deeply ingrained, and is so important, that one suspects a connection with the desire to transcend death.[3]

Throughout China, state-supported Confucian temples were established. Although deified by the state, Confucius was never a popular deity. He is sometimes incorporated into Chinese folk religion as a god, but of course this does not in itself justify calling Confucianism a religion. When Grichting asked a national sample of Taiwanese the open-ended question, "What is your religion?" about 1 percent responded "Confucianist." He concluded that: "Confucianism is probably not viewed as a religion but rather as a philosophy" (1971:51). Overall Sinitic peoples have not thought of themselves as practicing some religion called "Confucianism."

In sum, the scholarly tradition assumes the widespread acceptance of ideas about the sacred. The tradition neither challenges nor elaborates on these religious notions. The main purpose of the tradition is

to produce a harmonious society. For some, Confucianism may function as a religion; being part of the tradition may convey a sense of immortality.

LONG-TERM MODERNIZATION

Modernization theory assumes that we are part of a historical process dating back to premodern times. There is no definitive list of characteristics of this process, nor do all sociologists agree on the usefulness of this theory (for a general discussion of this topic, see Sztompka 1993). However, modernization theory remains a part of sociology, and we have found it useful for studying social change in Western and Eastern societies (Tamney 1992a, 1996).

Modernization can be viewed using long or short time frames. For the moment, we limit the discussion to the long term. As such, modernization means the process of change from small, traditional societies to the contemporary world. It is assumed that when the most technologically advanced societies existing at various points in time are compared, they will reveal directions of social change. That is, it is assumed that increasing technological sophistication produces social changes in a predictable manner.[4] The modernization process, as we conceive it, has five basic components: technological development, societal expansion, structural differentiation, the fragmentation of a society's culture, and the growing importance of the individual at the expense of groups.

As new technologies develop and societies expand, a more differentiated social structure emerges. A traditional society is essentially a large family with a unique culture. Thus modernization means development from a society "in which all the major roles are allocated on an ascriptive basis, and in which the division of labor is based primarily on family and kinship units" (Eisenstadt 1964:376). For instance, political, religious, and educational tasks, in traditional societies, would be assigned to people with certain family statuses (e.g., the oldest heads of families would be given political responsibilities). With modernization, new structures or institutions develop that specialize on political or religious or educational tasks and that become independent of the family and of each other. Thus the structure of social activities becomes more differentiated.

Structural differentiation has been accompanied by cultural fragmentation. As societies have become larger, a process whose facets have been described as urbanization, nation building, and more recently globalization, they have also become more pluralistic. In larger, more differentiated societies, it is necessary to talk about subcultures based on ethnicity or social class within societies. Illustrative of cul-

tural fragmentation in the West, while popular culture is based on "the secular scripture" (Frye 1976) epitomized by romance stories, elite culture uses a quite different "secular canon" (Bloom 1995), exemplified for English-speaking people by the works of Shakespeare. Thus in the West, there are popular and elite cultures, which do influence each other but which do not merge to form a single, unified culture.

A result of structural differentiation and cultural fragmentation is individuation: A sense of self not completely defined by social roles and group memberships (Coser 1991). As the social structure becomes differentiated, the various roles one plays involve the individual with diverse role partners who may not all have the same expectations, thus forcing individuals to consciously make personal choices. Cultural fragmentation has a similar consequence; thus individuals are forced to examine what they value, and what they want. Moreover, in a differentiated, fragmented society, even people in the same family will be faced with different choices and thus over time will develop different priorities. What emerges from this process are people who are more aware of having their own personal identities.

Modernization theory assumes that the popularity of a religion depends on how well it fits each historical situation. The implication is that secular change precedes religious change. Modernization theory, however, does not portray religious institutions as only continually reacting to secular changes. Rather, the theoretical assumptions are that the most significant causes of change are secular and that the consequences of such change are affected by the religious response to them. In addition, as previously noted, modernization theory assumes there is a direction of social change, and it argues that successful groups or movements will be those which accommodate the pattern of change. Thus, based on what we have written so far, the theory predicts that, in modernizing societies, religions are more likely to be successful to the extent they adjust to increasing technological development, societal size, structural differentiation, cultural fragmentation, and individuation.

The Axial Age

This was a critical period in the history of modernization. The Axial Age (c. 600 B.C.E.–c. 600 C.E.) is so called because during this period civilizations around the world experienced profound events that are still relevant, notably the Greek philosophers, the Jewish prophets, Christianity, the Roman state, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam. During this age, new religions appeared that broke the tie between a religion and a group (Mensching 1973). Religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity, focused on the salvation of individuals. The fundamental change was the new importance of the person. This change

was most fully accepted in the West. Individuation, we assume, had been becoming a more common experience for a long time. What was new was a cultural change: Religions ascribed ultimate importance to each and every individual. "Individualism" was born.

Individualism, that is, the cultural acceptance of the ultimate significance of the individual, has implications for all aspects of society.

> [It] means that the value of the person exceeds that of any group as such. Take the case of a family. According to individualism, the well-being of each member of the family is equally important, and the happiness of the members is more important than the status of the family as such; thus divorce can be justified in terms of improving the aggregate well-being of the individuals composing the family. Individualism is not egoism. The latter means being selfish, making one's self more important than anyone else. Individualism is not a glorification of the self. Rather, it is expressed in a respect for each person including the self. (Tamney 1996:11)

Individuation can result in individualism because, as we become aware of our unique qualities, we also become aware of qualities such as compassionate feelings which we share with others of various group affiliations. Thus individuation awakens a sense of a common humanity which is a necessary ingredient for creating individualism.[5]

The systematic use of second-order thinking also characterized the Axial period. That is to say, people began to think about knowledge, to analyze how we think, and to evaluate how we determine something is true. This change is epitomized by the invention of logic. The long-term consequence of this change was a greater reliance on reason as a tool for solving problems and answering questions.

A third characteristic of the Axial Age is epitomized by Plato's *New Republic*. This work was an attempt to design a new ideal society. Prior to this, prophets had criticized existing social arrangements in the name of an ethical idea, frequently the notion of a just society. Plato went beyond these efforts by trying to design a new kind of society. He initiated an often interrupted but continuing line of utopian thinking that has expressed confidence in humanity's power to design a new and better way of living than our predecessors had ever lived or conceived.

What distinguishes the Axial Age, then, is a new cultural development based on individualism, a new technology for improving the use of the mind, and a new worldview oriented to the future.

THE CHINESE AXIAL AGE

The classical period of Confucianism coincides with the Axial Age and centers on Master Kung, Mencius (371–289 B.C.E.), and Xun Zi (298–238 B.C.E.). While the scholarly tradition continues to expand even to