Religionizing Confucianism and the Re-orientation of Confucian Tradition in Modern China

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Around a century ago, the first republic in Asia was established in China and allegedly ushered in a new anti-monarchist political order. As the main ideological pillar of the imperial system for centuries, the fate of Confucianism was inextricably intertwined with that of the fallen Empire. Accordingly, Confucianism inevitably faced a struggle for survival in Republican China.

In reaction to the unprecedented crisis, the Association for Confucian Religion (孔教會 Kongjiaohui) was established in the year Republican China was founded. Its inaugural meeting was deliberately held on the 2463rd anniversary of Confucius’ birthday (the twenty-seventh day of the eighth month in the traditional lunar calendar) on 7 October 1912 and soon became the bastion of Confucian Religion.1

The Association for Confucian Religion was neither the only nor the first society established in the name of defending Confucianism. Numerous societies in the name of Confucius were formed in the year the Republic of China was established. These were notably the Association for Worshipping the Sage (宗聖會 Zongshenghui) in February; the Association for the Confucian Way (孔道會 Kongdaohui) in July; and the Association for Sustaining the Confucian Way (孔道維持會 Kongdao weichihui) in October, among many other small and locally oriented societies.2

1 In their own publications, the name of this association is simply translated as the Confucian Association. Yet in order to avoid any confusion with other similar societies at that time, I hereby employ the term Association for Confucian Religion to designate Kongjiaohui. The first serious study on this association was conducted by Hajime Abumiya, “Kokyōkai to kokyō no gokyōka: mingoku shoki no seijitōgō to rinrimondai.”

2 Kongjiao shinian dashiji (hereafter KJSN), vol. 7, 65. There might have been clandestine competition among these groups to win over one another’s supporters, but at least on the surface they maintained friendly relationships. After all they were sharing the same aspirations in the name of Confucius. There were cases where some members had joined more than one of these societies. To name a few, Yan Fu (1854–1921), a well-known translator of Western scholarship, and Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a multi-talented man and political activist, became members of the Association for the Confucian Way, and later they also joined the Association for Confucian Religion.
However, after the Association for Confucian Religion was established, it immediately won the support of many prominent literati and became the most illustrious and influential of all the organizations. For example, the Worshipping the Sage Association established sixty-four branches in its Shanxi base, but had only ten branches in the other seven provinces. In sharp contrast, the Association for Confucian Religion, though established a few months later than the other Confucian societies, developed so rapidly in size that in less than two years it had set up 130 nationwide and overseas branches. Some lawless elements even tried to solicit contributions by assuming its name or a similar one to confuse its supporters. Consequently, the Association for Confucian Religion issued a special notice that they had no relationship with societies by the name of Chinese Association of Confucianism (中國儒教會 Zhongguo rujiaohui) or Global Association of Worshipping Confucius (寰球尊孔會 Huanqiu zunkonghui).3

What made the Association for Confucian Religion the most influential of all the Confucian societies? In terms of their professed purposes, theoretically there was only one notable difference between the Association for Confucian Religion and other Confucian groups: it firmly and fiercely claimed to uphold Confucianism as a religion. As they claimed, Confucianism had long been enshrined as the state religion of the old dynasties and should continue to be worshipped as the national religion of the new Republic.

Confucianism’s Early Association with ‘Religion’

Linguistically, the modern Chinese equivalent of religion (宗教 zongjiao) did not exist until the end of the nineteenth century. The Chinese cognate jiao had been widely used for centuries to designate Buddhism (佛教 Fojiao), Taoism (道教 Daojiao), and Islam (天方教 Tianfangjiao or 回教 Huijiao). When Christianity was first introduced into China through Nestorius’s followers during the seventh and eighth centuries, it was termed jingjiao (景教) in Chinese, presumably denoting a teaching that embraced the “bright and vast Way”.4 Later Christianity was reintroduced

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3 Kongjiaohui zazhi (hereafter KJHZZ), vol. 1, no. 9.
4 A Nestorian tablet with abstruse inscriptions was first found in an excavation of 1625. Emmanuel Diaz (1574–1659), a Portuguese Jesuit, and his Chinese contemporary Yang Tingsun, one of the earliest Christian converts, had endeavored to decipher this tablet.