Problems with Confucianism in Building a Modern Culture

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Problems with Confucianism\(^1\) are currently at the forefront of research on Confucian culture and comprise a major issue in scholarship. Of course, saying it is a “major issue” in scholarship is limited to the field of scholarly research on Confucian culture. A discussion of problems with Confucianism has at least two points of entry. The first is research into its historicity to question whether Confucianism has been a religion in Chinese history as well as what kind of religion or what kind of cultural system. The second is as a practical framework that questions whether Confucian culture should be allowed to be incorporated into modern culture as a Confucian religion. Although these two points of entry in academia are different, the focus of academic research has been the building of a modern culture. That is, it is an attempt to clarify what kind of position and role Confucian culture, as the past pillar or mainstream of Chinese culture, should hold in the construction of a modern culture.

As soon as Confucianism, usually a safe and uncontroversial topic, concerns the building of modern culture, the outlook of modern culture becomes highly pessimistic and the discussions of and solutions to the issues of Confucianism are suddenly imbued with greater urgency: on the one hand, this problem is created by a culture of media and industrial self-interest and a fast-food mass culture; on the other hand, it is alternately, a glut of vacuity and alienation.

\(^1\) It is important to note that three different terms are used to denote “Confucianism” that are significant to distinguish in this discussion. First, the one used here and most commonly used in this chapter, is rujiao. Rujiao has a multitude of connotations and can be more literally understood as “the teachings of the [Confucian] scholars”; however, the word “teachings” (jiao) in rujiao also implies Confucianism in a religious sense. The author of this chapter appears to leave the distinction in Confucianism as religion or secular ideology with this term, rujiao, intentionally ambiguous. Second is the term rujia, which can be understood more literally as “the [Confucian] scholar school of thought” and will be made distinct when it is necessary for context. Third is the term ruxue, which generally refers to Confucianism as a generally secular philosophy and ideology, and not in a religious sense. It will be made clear with the term “Confucian learning” or some other variant to make the context clearer.—Trans.
throughout society, an uncontainable helplessness in people’s hearts, or the enduring neglect and forsaking of the mainstream culture and religion of society. Yet, the academic system as well as its accompanying perspectives and the baggage of analytical methodology are limited, including the cultural paradigm it formed through continuing criticism, destruction, and rejection, have made it difficult for people today to look at Confucianism beyond their own biases and dogmatic conclusions when expressing opinions on Confucian culture, including Confucianism. These problems with Confucianism have been revisited in modern times to have at least a “fragment of the way” and “to add new meaning to something that already exists” and recover this neglected field. Confucianism gives us another perspective to help us understand what kind of culture Confucian culture is. How has the Confucian heritage bequeathed by venerable forbears and the sages of old been distorted and obfuscated by modernity? As for modern people, what kind of values and meaning does Confucianism have for us today?

Confucianism is a “Teaching of Sages”

Is the “Confucianism” often cited and used by people a religion? Or is Confucianism a “teaching”? And, if so, what kind of “teaching” is it? In previous discussions, people have generally focused on the meaning of the word “teaching” in Chinese culture and its meaning in Confucian learning in an attempt to understand whether the “teaching” in Confucianism is more of a “teaching” in a philosophical sense or in a religious sense. At the same time, many have noted the religious nature of Confucian culture in their research, particularly research on the concepts of “heaven” or the “heavenly mandate.” The direction of these debates has unquestionably been appropriate and valuable. Based on this, it might be useful to understand this issue by integrating the ideal person in Confucianism—the “sage”—and the personal ideal in Confucianism—“to become a sage.”

Classical mainstream Chinese culture has been dominated by three main teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—yet the personal ideals in these three teachings contrast starkly. In Buddhism, one pursues “nirvana.” In Daoism, one seeks to become an “immortal.” And in Confucianism, one tries to “become a sage.” As Zhou Lianxi put it: “The sage strives to be like heaven. Heaven strives to be like the sage. The scholar strives to be like the morally virtuous” (in the Book of All Books). The goal of a Confucian is to seek personal cultivation to become a morally virtuous person and then to become a sage. The Confucian learning that they revere is a “learning of sages”; the Confucian