CHAPTER 5

Confucianism, Chinese Marxism, and Chinese Modernization

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Traditional Chinese culture without a doubt is very diverse. Confucianism is only one part of it. The historical culture of traditional Chinese society undeniably flowed and changed over time, and Confucian cultural traditions also flowed and changed over time, even interweaving with other cultural traditions. After the Opium Wars, with the disintegration of traditional society, Confucianism also waned. People became relatively unfamiliar with Confucian society and Confucian learning, leading to many disagreements on how to understand Confucianism. Hence, the question we discuss will most likely make most people suspicious. People may claim that there is no relationship whatsoever between Confucian learning, the construction of modernity, and Chinese Marxism. I still believe, however, that this issue needs to be earnestly considered and sorted out within certain parameters, thus I cast aside formalities and throw some thoughts out in hopes of sparking a good conversation from which others might learn.

Confucian Culture Was the Soil for Chinese Marxism

The issue of coherence between Chinese society, Confucianism, and Marxism has been a problem greatly debated in Chinese intellectual history for a century.¹

Since the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), Confucius has passed down the great traditions of Chinese antiquity, establishing Confucian learning up to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Confucian learning was constantly developing and expanding. After the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucian learning was not limited to study of the mind and texts but expanded its realm

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¹ In the 1920s, Liang Qichao, Guo Moruo, and others once composed a book discussing the commonality between Marxism and Confucianism. There was also considerable discussion on the link between Chinese society, Confucianism, and Marxism in the social history controversies of the 1930s.
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into the sociopolitical, education, history, and literature ever since the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), permeating every part of society to adapt and direct social development and people’s lives. As Confucianism worked its way into the political system, social customs, and education, as well as cultivating individuals, Confucian learning became the epitome of the way of life, behavior, thinking, and feeling for Chinese people for the past 2,500 years. Confucian learning governed the belief and faith of countless people to the point that, unbeknownst to them, it reached the everyday lives of commoners. Hence, the position of Confucian learning cannot be pinned down by the subjective intention or sense of a certain individual or a school of thought. The fact that Confucianism became the mainstream of the Chinese populace has been due to its basic essence, broad range, and historical development. Some critics and detractors of Confucian culture have overly simplified and narrowed Confucianism. They have abstracted Chinese society and Chinese historical development. In fact, traditional Chinese society was a Confucian society. The background and flow of traditional Chinese culture was Confucian. The personality of traditional Chinese people was inherently Confucian. At the same time, the role of Confucianism or Confucian learning in China was much akin to Christianity and Catholicism in the West, Orthodox Christianity in Russia, Hinduism in India, or Islam in the Arab world. They are all the common core of ethnic cultural identity and ethics.

The position of Confucian culture was naturally formed and was certainly not self-appointed. Confucianism was the learning of commoners. It was the product of an official ideology that spread to commoners. In an age in which education on the rituals and official rule had disintegrated, Confucius founded his own academy to take on the mission of transmitting the culture of Chinese antiquity to make education available to the people. Chinese society between the end of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the middle of the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE) gradually determined the position of Confucianism among hundreds of schools of thoughts through free choice. Confucian ideology is relatively easy and reasonable in that it is easy to accept the dictates that govern people. It satisfies and conforms to the sentiments of a cohesive society in peace and proactively contributes to the needs of the people. History tells us that “the realm can be conquered on horseback” but it is not applicable to “governing the realm.” Wise rulers of old seeking to govern the realm nearly all chose a form of government that was just and peaceful and policies that provided tranquility for the people. Confucianism was good at passing down the laws and institutions of antiquity for the present while also

2 By Christianity (jidujiao), the author may have meant to say Protestantism (Xinjiao).—Trans.