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The self and the other: An unanswered question in Confucian theory

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Abstract Fei Xiaotong’s thoughts on the Confucian system of interpersonal relationships actually indicated that the Confucian theory of social cooperation leads itself to an unsettled paradox, that is, there is a lack of universal theoretical construction in the Confucian moral system. Confucian theory does not extend beyond practical circumstances. Instead, its universal principles always disappear in specific circumstances. Because of its long established position in mainstream dialogue, Confucianism failed to reflect on its flaws, but this paradox has been revealed in the face of modern challenges.

Keywords system of interpersonal relations, institution, Confucian politics

1 On the modernization of Confucianism

China’s modernization has motivated people to demand an evolution in Chinese thought. As the mainstream Chinese philosophy, Confucianism’s modernization has naturally become a central topic in the modernization of Chinese philosophy.

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Confucianism successfully became a part of mainstream discourse, but this success led Confucianism to lose its challengers. Confucianism no longer faced questions from the outside world and did not come up with more advanced theories. In fact, the theoretical structure and the question system of Confucianism contains many things that were not completed, but its long-standing mainstream status led it to regard itself as theoretically flawless, a danger that was revealed when Confucianism faced modern challenges.

In this paper, please allow me to take the liberty to raise the topic of the “modernization of Confucianism.” This so-called modernization of Confucianism is primarily based on modern Western thought. It regards Confucianism as the explained object, a passive role, and asks Confucianism to respond to modern society. This passiveness that is often labeled “explained” and “responsive” is quite awkward, because modern society is principally a rebuttal of traditional society. Moreover, modern society has developed from Western society, and between Western society (even traditional Western society) and Confucian society, there is a barrier. There is an incompatibility between modern society and Confucian society. If “the modernization of Confucianism” means that Confucians must carry out reforms according to modern society, then I can almost assuredly state that this is a denial of Confucianism, or at the very least Confucianism will change beyond recognition. The “modernization of Confucianism” could also mean that Confucians themselves develop or change their own ideas towards modernization, but this hypothesis is also impossible because Confucianism and modernity are essentially incompatible. If “the modernization of Confucianism” means that Confucians critique modern questions, and this is entirely possible, but the critique would be limited to values or ideology, which has “academic” significance, but does not have constructive practical significance. The appearance of modern society is equal to a change in “tian 天 (the world).” So “Dao 道” should change accordingly. If Confucianism is to become the “Dao” for modern society, Confucians have to turn over a new leaf by thoroughly denying their theories, and it is not possible to just change external appearances. On this point, Confucians do not agree. Few people doubt the significance of great Confucian thought, but people have reason to doubt the so-called “modernization of Confucianism.” If it is impossible for Confucianism to become a modern theory, the movement to ask Confucianism to cater to modernization theory—cutting the feet to fit the shoes—is “counter-Confucianism.” Furthermore, Confucianism is a universal world outlook, and the “interpreter” of the world instead of “the interpreted.” Thus, if Confucianism is put in the place of “the interpreted,” Confucianism will change into local knowledge from universal significance, and then become a kind of “counter-Confucianism.”

However, there is a reason for Confucianism’s awkward situation in modern