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The contemporary significance of Confucianism

Abstract As we enter the new millennium, it has become more important to review and discover ancient wisdom. The project to build a harmonious society requires us to know our own “culture.” The biggest conflicts we human beings face are the conflicts between man and nature, man and man (man and society), and body and mind. The three philosophical propositions, “the unity of Heaven and man,” “the unity of self and others,” and “the unity of body and mind” of Confucianism may provide precious insight in dealing with the three above-mentioned conflicts, and we should pay special attention to these resources.

Keywords Confucianism, self-cultivation of morality, contemporary value

I have delivered speeches on the topic “The Contemporary Significance of Confucianism” several times, including in the 80’s and 90’s of the last century. Now, I will continue to address it in the 21st century. In addition to me, more and more scholars have started to address this topic. Why? I think there are two important reasons: One is that we are on the eve of the great revival of the
Chinese nation. So now, we must review our historical and cultural tradition. Karl Jaspers presented the notion of “the Axial Age.” He thought that great thinkers emerged in ancient Greece, Israel, India, China and other countries almost simultaneously around 500 B.C, and they all presented unique ideas on problems which concern all human beings. Aristotle and Plato in ancient Greece, Prophets of Judaism in Israel, Sakyamuni in India, and Laozi and Confucius in China independently initiated and formed distinctive cultural traditions. Through 2000 years of development, these cultural traditions have become central to human intellectual wealth, but these different cultures in different regions developed independently at the beginning, and did not originally influence each other. He says, until today mankind has lived all by what was thought and created during the Axial Age. In each new upward leap it returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it. Even since then it has been the case that recollections and reawakening of the potentialities of the Axial Period — renaissances — always afford a spiritual impetus. The return to the root is the continuous thing in China, India, and West (see Jaspers 1989, p. 14). For instance, the Europeans in the Renaissance looked back at the origin of their culture, ancient Greece, which revived European civilization and left its mark on global culture. Similarly, Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism in China was stimulated by Indian Buddhism; the Confucian thinkers, by “recalling” Confucius and Mencius in the pre-Qin Period, had promoted the ingenious Chinese philosophy to a new height. When we enter into the new millennium, the world’s intellectual circle has started to appeal for the arrival of “a New Axial Age.” Thus, it has become important to review and research ancient thoughts and wisdom, and recall the origin of our own culture in order to respond to the new, diverse world culture. Secondly, in the new century, our country has brought forward a great project to build a “harmonious society.” Fei Xiaotong has raised the issue of “cultural self-consciousness.” In order to build a “harmonious society,” we have to know our own “culture.” What is “cultural self-consciousness”? Fei Xiaotong in Reconsideration on Humanistic Value said:

Cultural self-consciousness denotes that people who live in a context of some culture have “self-knowledge” of their own culture, and can explain its origin, development, characteristics, and its trend. It does not mean that people “return to the original culture,” and “return to the ancients,” and it does not mean “complete westernization” or “complete hechua (otherization)” at the same time. The request for self-knowledge intends to strengthen the ability of self-determination in the process of cultural transformation, and grasp the initiative status of cultural choice in the process of adaptation to new conditions and new era (Fei 2005, p. 248).