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The Source of the Idea of Equality in Confucian Thought

Abstract Although the traditional society in China was not necessarily a society of equality, and the classical Confucianism did not speak much about the principle of universal equality, in modern times, in the midst of a transformation of value systems, people still find correlating sources within the Confucian tradition that is connected to the modern idea of equality. This essay makes a detailed study on this correlation and points out that ancient Chinese society and the western feudal society are different in terms of social systems and education systems. For example, China has the imperial examination but no patrimonial aristocracy. Confucianism opposed the huge gap between the poor and the rich, and this idea has become a modern tradition in the ideal of “great harmony under the sky,” especially in Kang Youwei’s 大同书 (Book of Great Harmony). There were also some elements of agricultural socialism and equalitarianism in traditional Confucianism. The potential idea of equality (or reciprocity) in “friendship,” embodied in the principle of Confucian ethics of the Three Bonds and the Five Relations, is explored and explained in a modern way. The theory that the sages are equal with the masses, which originated from the theory of human being’s intrinsic goodness, may be directly connected with modern principle of equality. The modern transformation of equality is both political and ethical. The former is to struggle for individual rights; the latter is to establish moral subjectivity. Therefore, equality between sages and the masses manifests modernity. Like the epistemic subjectivity, which could not be discussed without referring to group-individual relationship, the moral subjectivity also contains a consciousness of equality.

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Equality, which is regarded as one of the basic values of the modern times, is not original to modern people, although ancient people’s ideas of “equality” are different from the modern ideas of “equality.” “Equality” as a word appeared in ancient Chinese literature. This indicates that as early as other ancient peoples, the Chinese people also had a common human consciousness. It is like what Engels said: “The idea that all men, as men, have something in common, and that to that extent they are equal, is of course primeval. But the modern demand for equality is something entirely different from that; this type of demand consists even more of the common quality of being human, and that by extension, all human beings, or at least all citizens of a state or all members of a society, should have equal political and social status. Before that original conception of relative equality can lead to the conclusion that men should have equal rights in the state and in society, before that conclusion could even appear to be something natural and self-evident, thousands of years had to pass and did pass”1 (Howard 1963, p. 256). Viewed from the modern person’s concept of equality, ancient China naturally cannot be considered as an equal society. Thus in an unequal society, what form of traditional thought provided the original source which allowed present day Chinese people to accept modern concept of equal rights, or offered the starting point for this shift in thinking? Particularly, what theory is related to the modern concept of “equality” within the mainstream Confucian school of ancient Chinese thoughts?

In my revised book, Zhongguo Xiandai Jingshen Chuantong: Zhongguo Xiandaixing Guannian de Puxi 中国现代精神传统——中国现代性观念的谱系 (Modern China’s Intellectual Tradition: The Genealogy of China’s Conceptions of Modernity), I added a new chapter, “Pingdeng: Xinnian yu Shijian” 平等: 信念与实践 (“Equality: Belief and Practice”). In this chapter, I noticed Confucians’ criticism on the disparity between the rich and the poor due to the distribution of wealth, and the theory of the sages and the masses based on the goodness of human nature. The latter is similar to the Daoist pursuit of obtaining the Dao 道 (Way) and the Buddhist idea that anyone can attain Buddha-hood, which possess a certain metaphysical aspect of “equality.” Becoming a sage, obtaining the Dao and attaining Buddha-hood are all rooted in the pursuit of an absolute existence; thus it is the transcendental realm of eliminating all disparities. We can regard this transcendental realm as a high-sounding theory of equality, which has a huge gap with the reality of human society. Therefore, it is not sufficient and a bit crude to apply such judgment to emphasize the distinction between the idea of equality in the Confucianism of ancient times and the popularized concept of

1 The quotation is translated by Emile Burns from German to English.