

The Identity of Chinese Philosophy: New Confucianism and its International Context

Li Youzheng

Despite the divergency of the socio-political systems, the present-day Chinese communities in Asia adopt a similar socio-cultural strategy: material Westernization and spiritual nationalism. Over 90 percent of the population of these societies have practically been westernized with respect to their knowledge, profession and way of life, but the question is why and how the spiritual nationalism can be maintained today and whether there is a new Chinese philosophy guiding the nationalist spirit. Based on the traditional pragmatist Confucianist ideology, Chinese communities have been engaged in the socio-cultural experiment of this kind of Chinese-Western union in order to effectively separate as well as combine their twofold efforts: technical progressivism and ideological conservatism. Westernized modernity and the national tradition are intended to collaborate on a pragmatic level. The paradoxical point is expressed not in the old slogan of last century that "Western learning is utility; Chinese learning is substance", but rather in that of "Western learning is substance and Chinese learning is utility". The essence is that the spiritual and cultural tradition is employed to pursue the Western-oriented socio-technical goal: the modernist compound of science-technology-economy. This industrial-commercial social setting is the very background in front of which current Chinese philosophy faces its multiple possibilities.

During the span of 30 years between the fall of the last dynasty and the start of the industrial modernization there was a vigorous philosophical life in China. During that period, Chinese intellectuals of the humanities with their rich traditional learning and a new international insight created an active intellectual dialogue between Chinese and Western scholarship after the initial intrusion of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Bergson, Russell and Dewey in the 1920s. The country was then strongly inspired by different philosophical interests. After World War II and the Maoist revolution this golden period of Chinese intellectual history was gone and the new era was characterized by its prevailing technical modernization in various Chinese communities. Philosophical thought does no longer play an important role in the commercialized Chinese societies nowadays except a nationalist one: New Confucianism, despite the fact that it mainly plays a role in the quasi-political rather than philosophical field in Asia.

Contemporary New Confucianism is a philosophical movement that emerged half a century ago. In distinction from other philosophical schools, it claims to be a national philosophy or the orthodox representative of Chinese national philosophy and regards itself as the main exponent and guard of Chinese national culture and spirit, although its relation to various Chinese political powers has always been uncertain and changeable. From the very beginning it suffered from its identity as a philosophy in a modern sense and, at the same time, as an ideological compound

like traditional Confucianism with its various socio-cultural dimensions. When it first emerged in the mid-1940s during the war, it had a twofold objective: to save the country from foreign imperialism and to save Chinese culture from the intrusion of Western thought. The relation between the two objectives is ambiguous with reference to their conceptions, objects and directions, because the first objective is more related to the political dimension which evidently required a non-philosophical treatment exactly based on Western politics and economics. As a result, the second objective has become the only substantial part of this philosophy. How to defend Chinese philosophy from the influence of Western philosophy became the main concern of the first and second generations of this school, while Western and Marxist philosophy began to be much more prevalent in China then. In essence, the earlier New Confucianism had been a direct reaction to Western philosophy when the latter had advanced steadily in China over the twenty years prior to the Anti-Japanese War.

When Marxism-Maoism conquered the mainland in 1949, New Confucianism obtained a special chance to develop in Hong Kong and Taiwan because of the disappearance of the former nationwide philosophical stage in both the mainland and the overseas areas. Once again, it was faced with another twofold task: to oppose the Marxist politics and to develop a Chinese nationalist philosophy. Because the main New Confucianist philosophers (such as Xiong Shili, Liang Souming and Feng Youlan, the most distinguished among them) of the first generation preferred to remain in the Marxist mainland and accordingly gave up their earlier philosophical work, the new mission was undertaken by their overseas followers of the second generation (Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan and others). Similarly, New Confucianist philosophy had no special means to deal with Marxist politics either, its work mainly consists of reconstructing Chinese philosophical history in terms of Western methodology on the one hand and criticizing Western logic-directed metaphysics on the other. In general, the intellectual efforts of the two generations were directed towards forming a nationalist ontology based on the Taoist and Buddhist ontologies (since the original Confucianism lacks an ontological theory), for Buddhism with its Indian origin seemed closer to the traditional Chinese taste than Western thought.

Between 1950 and 1980 New Confucianist philosophy enjoyed a most successful period because it became the mainstream in Taiwan and Hong Kong due to a general cultural nationalism that was politically encouraged and also to the fact that most Chinese philosophers specialized in Western philosophy remained in the mainland after 1949. During that period Marxist China and its ideology were simply regarded as an anti-nationalist power by the New Confucianists. Moreover, during that period there was no longer a serious philosophy in China that could present a philosophical challenge to other schools. Based on this political background, New Confucianism became a nationalist spiritual symbol outside the mainland. On the other hand, however, it did not really become an orthodox state-philosophy because of the conflict within the nationalist academic factions, especially the lasting confrontation between nationalist historiography and nationalist philosophy. (In general, for Taiwan the "state-learning" (*guo xue*) has always been more historical than philosophical.) In brief, the two major fields of traditional Chinese learning

have always competed for the representativeness of Chinese spirit. But, fortunately, New Confucianist philosophy obtained a new refreshing start when it entered American soil due to the immigration of the followers of the second generation of the movement.

With the twofold spiritual origin in the mainland (before 1949) and Hong Kong/Taiwan (after 1949), the headquarters of the third generation of New Confucianism has now been set up in America (especially Harvard and Honolulu). Almost all Chinese-American Confucianist philosophers teaching in America were the students of the New Confucianists of the second generation in Taiwan and Hong Kong. They and their Western sinological colleagues have successfully built up an international network based on the Western sinological institutions for the past three decades. In distinction from the efforts of the earlier two generations either towards the ontological originality of the first generation or towards the systematic historical construction of the second generation, the third generation attempts a Western-Chinese philosophical complementarity within a Confucianist framework. They claim to have launched the "third Confucianist movement" in Chinese history (the three movements are: the original Confucianism, the Taoist-Buddhist Confucianism and the modernized Confucianism) on a world scale, namely on the basis of Western sinology.

On the one hand, the internationalization of New Confucianism enhanced its confidence in its own intellectual worth, but on the other hand, it was confused about its own identity once again. Is it part of Western sinological studies or part of Chinese philosophy? The ambiguity remains less harmful than before, because any academic success of Chinese scholars attained in the West has been naturally regarded as the most important achievement of Chinese scholarship by both sides of China: so-called *guoji chengren* (international recognition). (That is why more than half of the members of Academia Sinica in Taiwan are Chinese Americans.) However, a historical paradox occurred then: On the one hand New Confucianists ought to believe that their Chinese philosophy is superior to Western philosophy, but on the other hand, their academic status is more advanced than that of their colleagues at home exactly because their scholarship is now based on and recognized by the Western academia. Nowadays, for both the Chinese authorities and the Chinese public the value of any Chinese scholarship, including the traditional one, should obtain the recognition of Western scholarly authorities. Regarding Chinese philosophy, this is a recognition by Western sinology. If this is so, then who is superior to whom between Chinese and Western scholarship with respect to their respective Chinese studies?

The academic structures of Western sinology and modern Chinese philosophy are evidently different because of their different historical and cultural backgrounds, although they share the same historical material of Chinese philosophy. If the former is more interested in understanding the content of Chinese traditional scholarship, the latter is more interested in grasping all useful philosophy, especially the Western. One is about the past, the other about the future. Western sinological study of Chinese philosophy must have a focus and scope of philosophical studies different from modern Chinese philosophy which is concerned with its own future devel-

opment. But now New Confucianism has to face another ambiguity: In the West its subject happens to be the required object of sinology, indicating its value in the West (namely, Western sinology), which is indeed the necessary condition of its being valued and recognized at home (both sides) as well. Thus, Western sinology becomes the new stronghold of Chinese nationalist philosophy. Could New Confucianist philosophy without sinology still keep its present position?

The answer seems to be positive because of the recent development of the new nationalism having prevailed in various Chinese communities since the 80s. The 80s experienced the second strong wave of the absorption of contemporary Western philosophy in Chinese communities during this century. Despite the opposing social systems for the past thirty years, in both sides of China there emerged a new comprehensive curiosity for Western philosophy (e.g., the translations of the following Western thinkers in both sides: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Ricoeur, Barthes, Metz, Kuhn, Carnap, Quine, Rorty, Gadamer, Habermas, and a number of others). During the post-Marxist period international New Confucianism is disappointed, however, in finding that its philosophy cannot attract the Chinese mind in comparison with the intellectually stronger Western thought. On the one hand, the Overseas Chinese philosophers are not more competent interpreters of Western philosophy than their counterparts at home and on the other hand, their Western social background no longer functions well in Chinese circumstances; moreover, the original Western thought possesses a much stronger appeal to most Chinese intellectuals, not entirely owing to purely scholarly reasons. Fortunate to the New Confucianist movement, however, the new political conditions in East Asia have simultaneously tended towards a cultural nationalism everywhere. New Confucianism has gained a double support once again: Asian politics and the Western scholarly basis. Because it is internationally recognized that the first important headquarters of current New Confucianism lies in the West, the Western New Confucianists are invited back by the Asian authorities in order to promote a Confucianist spirit in Asia which ironically works towards the technical westernization. Therefore, East Asian authorities make use of two different Western sources: the Western technical potential and the Western potential for Chinese philosophy. In other words, Western New Confucianism is used in two directions: its Chinese historical material and its Western social background. Both are necessary for its further development in Asia. On the one hand, it spreads Chinese philosophy in the West and on the other hand its contribution to the Western academia becomes the cause of its significance to Asian authorities. The Western New Confucianists frequently complain that Chinese philosophers at home too much admire Western philosophy and forget their own cultural origin. Maybe this is true. It is paradoxical, however, that the Western New Confucianists in fact more substantially rely on the Western academia. The connection of Chinese scholars at home with the West lies on the intellectual level, while their Chinese counterparts in the West are committed to the institutional level. Then who is more pro-Western? The point lies in the fact that the Western New Confucianists serve the Western academia with their privileged Chinese material; this fact is explained by them as promoting the Chinese spirit in the West. Practically speaking, it is essential that without its Western foundation New Confucianism could hardly survive on its present scale in the future.

The situation becomes more complicated if we try to distinguish the Chinese-Western and the Western sinological philosophers, although both of them belong to the same field of sinology. In general, Western sinologists do not share a similar double psychology: as the Confucianist devotees and as the normal teachers of Chinese culture. But Western sinologist philosophers would be glad if they unexpectedly found their social influence to be increasing in Asia because of the political prestige of their scholarship created by their Chinese colleagues there. They would interpret the fact as the natural international advance of the social influence of their common scholarship. In turn, this substantial progress might strengthen their professional position in the West as well. Then, what is Chinese philosophy for them today? Unfortunately, this question is beyond the concern of sinological philosophy, because the scope of the present-day Chinese philosophy is much larger than Confucianist or New Confucianist philosophy. In fact, Chinese philosophy extensively overlaps with international philosophy, including the traditional Chinese. For the sake of grasping the entire philosophical horizon of China, Western sinological philosophy should extend its present historical perspective. And sinology must enlarge its present philological and historical focus and be transformed to the "human sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*) about Chinese culture and thought.

For the reason of maintaining a nationalist philosophy during this century in which China has lacked any important original philosophy because of the technical orientation of her modernization, the philosophical movement of New Confucianism has been basically stimulated externally or for utilitarian purposes. The external stimulations are expressed in both the minds of the philosophers and of the political users of the philosophy indicating a clearly ideological character. Comparatively speaking, the New Confucianist movement of three generations presents a unique philosophy representative of the Chinese philosophical tradition of over one thousand years. The new ambiguity of the identity of its international development lies in the fact that the philosophical agents are originally Chinese but academically they are based on Western academia and society. Along with their Western colleagues, they create a new Western philosophical school whose origin was Chinese. Thus, we see an identical ambiguity of this philosophical movement touching upon its content, origin, agents, social, cultural and historical contexts and intellectual direction. The international New Confucianists declare they have launched a new philosophical movement now. But who would be its participants or supporters? Besides the Chinese Western Confucianists and their colleagues at home whose number becomes less and less in Taiwan, they can only be the Western sinologists and some Asian authorities. In brief, paradoxically enough, the main supporters are: Western sinology and Asian powers. It is evident that they have little chance in Chinese philosophical circles which face a much wider philosophical horizon. Then who can represent a "Chinese philosophy"? Or, should it be defined by the geographical or the historical parameter of a philosophical culture? Originally New Confucianism emerged in defense of the challenging Western thought, while now it chooses to develop on the basis of the West. This irony signifies the social and cultural complexities in our times.