

INTRODUCTION

There have been three major episodes of the controversy on Confucian religiosity throughout Chinese intellectual history. The first episode started in the late 16th century with the Jesuit attempt to convert the Chinese population, and ended with the bitter twist of the Rites Controversy in the mid-18th century. Instead of seeing the sect of *Literati* as some form of paganism, the early Jesuits, Matteo Ricci in particular, tried to explore the compatibilities between Confucianism and Christianity from a pragmatic perspective. For them, Confucianism was nothing short of a preparation for the coming of Christianity to the Chinese land. It is through this historical encounter that Confucianism as a body of philosophy, beliefs, and rituals was systematically construed in Western societies. While the social and political conditions of the time did not allow the Jesuits to make much of headway, their effort to conciliate Confucianism with Christianity had set a long-lasting tone for modern imaginations about Confucianism and about religion in both Eastern and Western academic fields.

The second surge of the controversy on Confucian religiosity took place during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when China was tremendously traumatized by social and political turmoil. Many Chinese intellectuals—traditionalists and iconoclasts alike—endeavored to capitalize on Confucianism for their political causes. While Kang Youwei and his followers tried to dress Confucianism up as a state religion to counter the influence of Christianity, the May Fourth intellectuals vehemently opposed any attempt of this kind. For the former, Confucianism is the gravity for the inspiration of Chinese national spirit just as Christianity is for Western societies; for the latter, Confucianism

belongs to the past and has to be swept into the realm of academics. In spite of their antagonistic attitudes toward Confucianism, the two camps shared a common ground: their arguments about Confucian religiosity were complicated by social, political, and cultural agendas.

The third episode of the controversy on Confucian religiosity appeared in the late 1970s, a period when China just survived the Cultural Revolution and opened up to the world. Ren Jiyu, the director of the Institute for Research on World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, presented a proposition defining Confucianism as “a religion.” This move immediately set off a storm on the intellectual landscape of contemporary China. Since then there has emerged a huge controversy on the legitimacy, relevance, and orientation of the conceptualization of Confucianism in terms of religion. There are two distinctive attitudes toward defining Confucianism: to sacrifice a “tidy” definition of religion and give legitimacy to dialogues between Confucianism and other world religions; or, to safeguard a humanistic approach and endorse dialogues between Confucianism and other traditions only on a philosophical level. Despite the fact that the debate is still plagued by ideological persuasions, its latest development has taken to an epistemological high ground that was not arrived at before. There is a growing tendency among Chinese scholars to reflect on the question on Confucian religiosity in light of the understanding of Chinese tradition and modernity.

The complexity of the controversy on Confucian religiosity can only be recognized with regard to the drastic transformation of modern China in which it was shifted from Confucian paradigms to the paradigms of modernity. The discontinuity between tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience is manifested in both the crisis of ontological

meaning and the crisis of social and political order. Hence, any discussion on Confucian religiosity should be reflected in terms of the dual manifestation of the paradigmatic shift in modern Chinese history. Specifically, one needs to take into account two major changes on the Chinese intellectual landscape: first, traditional disciplines of religion, philosophy, and ethics have retreated from all domains of modern age to the reservoir of pure academics; second, any scholarship on Chinese philosophy, culture, and religion is entrusted with a “holy” mission of safeguarding the “national spirit,” an autonomous region which is essentially irrelevant to the process of modernization.

Admittedly, the essence of the controversy on Confucian religiosity has less to do with the discipline of religious studies than with the political and cultural concerns of Chinese intellectuals. In other words, the seemingly epistemological question is inextricably entangled with political and cultural significations. The problem of defining Confucianism must be approached with regard to both its epistemological and ideological foundations. This means not only an investigation of Chinese and Western conceptions of religion but also an examination of positive and negative attitudes toward Confucianism and toward religion in general. To explore the complexity of the controversy on Confucian religiosity is in one way or another to sail through the Chinese intellectual journey of perceiving tradition and modernity. Hence, the attempt to demarcate Confucianism from the social and cultural context and to define it in the category of religion needs to be engaged in this perspective.

There is no way to say that the problem of defining Confucianism has less to do with epistemological principles than with political and cultural considerations, much less that the significance of understanding Confucian religiosity can only be realized in political

and cultural agendas. The question of “Is Confucianism a religion?” is formulated, more than anything else, as a hermeneutic construct, and has to be addressed in accordance with epistemological terms. The political and cultural significations of the controversy on defining Confucianism are constitutive rather than destructive of the textuality of such a hermeneutic construct. Hence, defining Confucianism in the Western category of religion is probably risky and rewarding at the same time. The challenge of this experiment means both the prospect of understanding Chinese tradition and modernity through a new angle, and the potential to confront and even redefine the principles and norms we employ to qualify “a religion.”

Meaning can be created not only by how a question is answered, but also by how a question is asked. This is especially true when it comes to defining Confucianism in the category of religion. What is at stake in the question is not academic accountability, but rather the possibility and feasibility of Confucianism reinventing itself in post-Confucian paradigms. The very fact that “Confucianism” and “religion” are juxtaposed in such an intriguing question has already indicated that our modern conception of Confucianism is inevitably bound up with our perception of religion. It is precisely in this sense that the question itself might be more constructive and illuminating than a straightforward “yes” or “no” answer. How we categorize Confucianism does not change the “what, when, where, and how” of the Confucian tradition unfolded in history, but it may fundamentally shape our conception, interpretation, and understanding of the Chinese people’s past, present, and future.

As a hermeneutic project focusing on the controversy over Confucian religiosity, this thesis is intended to investigate its origin, development, and significance in light of

modern Chinese history. Specifically, it will explore the following aspects: the linguistic and epistemological foundations upon which the question is constructed, i.e., how it is possible in the Chinese textuality; the cultural and socio-political complications of the question, i.e., how it has been approached and interpreted throughout Chinese history; and the historical and existential significance of the question, i.e., what it has to do with the understanding of Chinese tradition and modernity. Although this project demands the integration of both cross-cultural and interdisciplinary paradigms, it is not meant to be either a comprehensive exploration of the manifestation of Confucian religiosity, or a scholastic apologetics on what the essence of a religion is. Instead, it focuses on the significance of the debate on Confucian religiosity to the understanding of the existential conditions of the Chinese people. The ultimate goal of the project is to examine how the seemingly “religious” question points to the very foundation of modern Chinese mentality, upon which Chinese understanding of themselves is based.

The thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter tackles the epistemological problems and linguistic ambiguity of the question on Confucian religiosity, that is, how the question is construed in the Chinese textuality. In order to do so, I will investigate the terminological problems of *rujia*, *rujiao*, *ruxue*—the Chinese equivalents of the Western term of “Confucianism”—on the one hand, and the Chinese reception of the Western conceptualization of religion on the other. I argue that although all three terms refer to the Confucian tradition, they differ from each other in terms of their capability to signify Confucian religiosity. Which term to choose to construe the question is predetermined by and in turn supports the scholar’s attitude toward the “religiosity” of Confucianism. Meanwhile, the essentialist conception of religion in Chinese academies is likely to lead

the discussion on Confucian religiosity to a deadlock. In short, the question in the Chinese textualty has manifested a selective and circular nature which in turn points to particular values and implications that are conditioned by the socio-political and cultural factors of modern times.

In the second chapter, I investigate the three episodes of the historical development of the controversy on Confucian religiosity. First, I will survey the Jesuit, especially Matteo Ricci's, interpretation of Confucianism, and examine how this approach had set the tone for modern imaginations about Confucianism. I then proceed to inspect Kang Youwei's campaign to define Confucianism as a philosophy of reform and as a religion, as well as the May Fourth intellectuals' counter effort. I will also examine how the controversy during this period has decisively shaped modern Chinese consciousness. Finally, I will move on to explore the latest development of the controversy in the past two decades, paying special attention to how the debate has taken an epistemological turn despite its ideological overtones. I will also reflect on the New Confucian approach to the question about Confucian religiosity, asserting that although the school did not actually participate in the controversy, their metaphysical orientation sheds important light on the understanding of the question.

The third chapter will examine how the methodological breakthrough in religious studies has made possible the discussion on Confucian religiosity in an epistemological sense, and how the social, political, and cultural significations of the question are channeled through a retrospective construction. Specifically, I will inspect the pragmatic turn in defining religion by surveying several prominent scholars' methodological contribution to the understanding of religion as an analytical tool in cross-cultural studies.

I will also launch a phenomenological investigation of Confucian religiosity and assess its definability in terms of a pragmatic concept of religion. I argue that the controversy on Confucian religiosity has provided both a source and a test case for new ideas about Confucianism and about religion. The validity and utility of any definition of religion should only be recognized with respect to the fact that it is no more than a conceptual instrument or an analytical tool.

The last chapter explores the cultural and historical significance of the controversy on Confucian religiosity in post-Confucian paradigms. I will inspect how the tension between tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience has constituted the context in which the understanding of the controversy on Confucian religiosity has developed. In order to do so, I will examine how the New Confucian approach to the question of Confucian religiosity is phrased in terms of the understanding of modernization and of modernity. I will point out that the theoretical limitation of the New Confucian approach to Confucian religiosity rests in the confrontation between generality and particularity, and between theory and practice. I argue that their reactions to Confucianism scholarship mainly occur on the emotional and volitional planes, alongside the philological and exegetical, and have thus assumed a nationalistic nature. Failing to release academic commitment from the bondage of the nationalistic persuasion, the whole body of scholarship on Confucianism is at risk, so is the understanding of Chinese tradition and modernity.

CHAPTER I

PROBLEMS AND AMBIGUITY OF THE CONTROVERSY ON CONFUCIAN RELIGIOSITY

Is Confucianism a religion? This seemingly plain question has troubled many people in the East and West, scholars and amateurs alike. Why such a question? Why there is no such question on Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, or any other major religions in the world? Probably this is one of the most controversial and least conclusive questions for the minds that have come across the borders of cultures and civilizations. In some sense, it is the heel of Achilles in the scholarship of and about Confucianism. Wilfred C. Smith, the famed professor of religious studies at Harvard University, has once claimed that it is a question the West has never been able to answer, and China never able to ask.¹ While highly rhetorical, this statement somehow reveals Smith's obvious perplexity and frustration in tackling the long-time troublesome issue. What is on Smith's mind, if one reads him correctly, is nothing other than the predominant problem of the concept of religion itself, be it its ramifications in the Western linguistic history,² or its total absence in the Chinese vocabulary before the modern age.³

To make the case even more complicated, one would further speculate, Smith must have been aware of the "marginality" of Confucianism in terms of religion when making

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), p.68.

² On the transformation of the concept of religion in the Western linguistic history, see W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, and Jan G. Platvoet, Arie L. Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts, and Contests* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1999).

³ So far no adequate research has been done on the translation of "religion" into the Chinese language. Scattered reference can be found in Helen Hardacre, *Shinto and the State, 1868-1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp.63, 177n14, 15; Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), pp.1-3; and Hengyu, "Lun Zongjiao" (On Religion), *Shijie Hongming Zhexue Jikan*, 1998, vol.3.

such a statement. To say “marginality” in this case, it should be noted, is to suggest the reciprocal relations between “Confucianism” and “religion” in the syntagmatic chain.⁴ Not only does it signify the uniqueness of Confucianism in comparison with the general understanding of religion, it also questions the legitimacy of the very defining action in a cross-cultural context. The problem of the concept of religion and the “marginality” of Confucianism are actually two sides of the same coin, since any definition involves the formalization of both the *definiens* and the *definiendum* simultaneously.⁵ The double defiance of the terms of “religion” and “Confucianism” to formalization makes the enterprise of categorizing the Confucian tradition extremely laborious and fruitless. As Paul Rule has noticed, “for the historian or phenomenologist of religion, Confucianism presents a kind of extreme or limiting case in which the religious or sacred elements are elusive and challenge many of the accepted generalizations.”⁶ It is therefore no surprise that scholars in and outside China have been struggling with the problem of defining Confucianism for a long time and a meaningful conclusion has yet to appear.

The question whether Confucianism is a religion, or, in what sense Confucianism can or cannot be defined as a religion, is a very modern challenge brought about by the tension of tradition and modernity specifically in the Chinese experience.⁷ In other words, it is a question raised in the midst of the Chinese intellectual transformation in which things Confucian and things Western have confronted and interacted with each other.

⁴ The discourse of “Is Confucianism a religion?” can be viewed as an ideal type of syntagm in Saussure’s sense. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*; quoted in *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p.975.

⁵ On the relationship between the *definiens* and the *definiendum*, see Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), pp.13; and Platvoet & Molendij, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.232-233.

⁶ Paul A. Rule, *K’ung-Tzu or Confucius – The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (Sydney, London, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), xiii.

⁷ See “‘Rujia yu Zongjiao’ Yantaohui Xianchang Luyin” (The Recordings of “Confucianism and Religion Symposium”), (1), in www.confucius2000.com.

There was virtually no occasion for this question to arise in the traditional Chinese society, since all pre-modern academic practices that could nowadays be identified as religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., were not compartmentalized and differentiated from the scholarship of Confucianism.⁸ To ask such a question, one would have presumably recognized and accepted modern categorizations and compartmentalizations that were actually implemented in accordance with Western scientific principles and norms at the turn of the 20th century. Hence, Smith's suspicion on the universal applicability of "religion" at least makes a good sense in the Chinese context, given the sheer complexity of employing Western paradigms to schematize a system that is arguably resistant to theorizing in every respect.⁹

However, the difficulty of defining Confucianism in terms of religion goes well beyond the depth Smith would have possibly arrived at. To put it simply, the controversy on Confucian religiosity¹⁰ has been complicated by the very nature of modern Chinese history, and has assumed much greater complexity and profundity than just in an epistemological or linguistic sense. The "essence" of the controversy, according to Zheng Jiadong, has less to do with the academic disciplines of religious studies and philosophy than with the political and cultural concerns of Chinese intellectuals.¹¹ What is at stake in the question is not an epistemological examination of Confucianism in the Western category of religion, but rather an existential endeavor to explore the possibility and

⁸ "The Recordings of 'Confucianism and Religion Symposium'" (1), in www.confucius2000.com.

⁹ The underdevelopment of epistemology in Chinese philosophy has been widely attributed to the neo-Confucian principle of "unity of knowledge and action" (*zhixing heyi*), which is believed to prefer experience to speculation.

¹⁰ The controversy on Confucian religiosity includes two dimensions: the question of whether or not Confucianism is a religion; and the metaphysical approach to Confucian religiosity which does not directly tackle the definition problem.

¹¹ Zheng Jiadong, "Rujia Sixiang de Zongjiaoxing Wenti" (The Question of Religiosity in Confucian Thoughts), *Kongzi Yanjiu* (Study of Confucius), no. 3-4, 1996.

feasibility of reinventing tradition in post-Confucian paradigms.¹² In other words, the “religion or not” debate on Confucianism is not so much about its religiosity as about the integrity of Chinese tradition and culture in general. To dismantle the complexity of the controversy, one needs to understand how Chinese intellectuals have managed to approach the question about tradition and modernity by appealing to Western concepts and categories. Since the problem has been inextricably entangled in the broader context of East-West encounter, it must be engaged in the light of both intra- and inter-cultural sensitivities. Only in this perspective can one understand the meaning and significance of the controversy on Confucian religiosity in a specifically Chinese textuality. As far as the history of modern China is concerned, the question “Is Confucianism a religion?” surely matters to those who are burdened with the melancholy of tradition and are scorched by the anxiety of modernity.

Epistemological Problem: Transculturating “Religion”

The controversy on Confucian religiosity did not emerge as a serious problem until the turn of the 20th century, when the holistic structure of Confucianism was disintegrated and Western science and technology were introduced to China.¹³ In the wake of Sino-West encounter, Chinese intellectuals endeavored to employ Western scientific principles and norms to interpret the social, political, and cultural reality of Chinese society. Hence, many traditional scholarly establishments which used to be under the governance of

¹² Confucianism as an institutional establishment was disintegrated in 1911 when the Qing Dynasty was overthrown by the revolutionists, resulting in the ascendance of Western-style institutions and ideas.

¹³ While the controversy can be traced back to Matteo Ricci’s time and to the Rites Controversy during the 16th and 17th centuries, it was predominantly a Jesuit question then and did not challenge the authority of Confucianism in society. See Wu Wenzhang, “Lun Rujia yu Rujiao: Cong Rujia Shifou wei Zongjiao Tanqi” (On Confucianism: Whether or not it is a Religion), in www.confucius2000.com.

Confucianism were systematically deconstructed, compartmentalized, and reorganized into the modern academic disciplines of politics, ethics, philosophy, law, and others. As a consequence, Confucianism as a whole was subjected to various reinterpretations and reconstructions with regard to Western scientific principles and norms. On different occasions, it could be engaged as a political system, a philosophical school, a body of ethical teachings, or even a bundle of juristic documents, whereas the effort to define it in the category of religion had resulted in nothing definitive. With the triumph of science and democracy during the May Fourth period, Confucianism was generally regarded as philosophy and the controversy on its religiosity was temporarily diminished.¹⁴

Not until half a century later, i.e., the late 1970s, did the controversy reemerge on the intellectual landscape and soon become one of the most challenging problems for contemporary Chinese scholars. Despite its detachment from direct political and social agendas, the born-again controversy bears striking resemblance to the debate of the May Fourth period in terms of ambiguity and complexity. In general, all positions in the current controversy can be divided into two camps: the philosophical approach and the religious approach, both of which have to do with the Chinese construction of the concept of religion. The philosophical approach interprets Confucianism as a form of philosophy and advocates philosophical dialogues between Confucianism and other traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions. But the bottom line is to deny the religiosity of Confucianism to the degree that it be admitted into the family of religions.

¹⁴ On the controversy over Confucian religiosity during the May Fourth period, see Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

This approach is often prevalent when an “essentialist” definition of religion is favored, as has been the case most of the time in the 20th century.¹⁵

On the other hand, the religious approach is inclined to recognize Confucianism as some kind of religion without denying its philosophical quality. While many advocates of this approach tend to emphasize the “uniqueness” of Confucianism, e.g., its “humanistic” or “ethical” orientation, when compared to other religions, some scholars have proceeded to employ religious paradigms, especially Christian paradigms, to diagnose the religious dimension of Confucianism.¹⁶ The religious approach to Confucianism is both a serious challenge and a possible direction for the theoretical construction of religion in Chinese academies. Hence, despite the continuing dominance of the philosophical approach in the scholarship of and about Confucianism, the controversy on Confucian religiosity appears to be increasingly caught up in the confrontation between these two approaches.

An examination of the intellectual history of modern China would suggest that the social, cultural and political factors have all played an important part in constituting the complexity and ambiguity of the controversy on Confucian religiosity. However, the meaning and significance of the controversy cannot be thoroughly understood without paying due attention to its linguistic ramifications. The question on Confucian religiosity, like many other epistemological questions that are raised in the context of East-West encounter, can be traced all way back to the translation and introduction of Western terms and categories. Accordingly, clarifying these terms and concepts is nothing less than a necessary step towards dismantling the complexity of modern academic problems. Given its heavy reliance on Western theoretical constructs such as “philosophy” and “religion,”

¹⁵ On the essentialist definition of religion, see Platvoet & Molendijk, ed., *Pragmatics of Defining Religion*.

¹⁶ Ren Jiyu, He Guanghu, and Li Shen, members of the so-called “Confucian Religion School,” are the primary representatives of this approach. See Chapter Two of my dissertation.

the controversy on Confucian religiosity is especially in need of such a linguistic and terminological investigation. In any case, it is necessary and fundamental to examine, in the first place, how the Western concept of religion was introduced to and transformed in the Chinese language, and how this transformation might have affected the way the discussion on Confucian religiosity has actually been conducted throughout the history of modern China.

Reception of “Religion” in the Chinese Textuality

The transformation of the Western concept of religion in the Chinese vocabulary has drawn increasing attention from both the scholarship of Confucianism and the discipline of religious studies. Ironically, W. C. Smith’s assertion that China can never ask the question on Confucian religiosity, as rhetorical as it can be, has just told half of the story. The deficiency of the concept of religion in the Chinese vocabulary, much to Smith’s surprise, is essentially less generic than technical.¹⁷ In the traditional Chinese language, several terms have already been used in connection with what may be referred to as religion in the modern age. One of the terms is *dao*, which originally means the way, or the great cosmological principle that governs the operation of the universe; but when used in connection with religious beliefs and organizations, it refers to a sect, such as *xiantian dao* (the sect of pre-birth) and *taiping dao* (the sect of great peace).¹⁸ Another term *zong*, originally meaning ancestral worship and ancestral tradition, has been

¹⁷ With the introduction of Western sciences to China in the modern age, the concept of religion also made its entry into the Chinese vocabulary. The question “Is Confucianism a religion?” can actually be asked in the Chinese language pretty much the same way it can in Western languages, only that it might carry different values and implications. This is what I mean by “less generic than technical.”

¹⁸ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), p.2.

extended to denote religious sect or faction, and is in close association with beliefs and sacrificial activities.¹⁹ However, both *dao* and *zong* as independent words have ceased to be in active circulation in the modern time, largely due to the vernacular movement in the early 20th century in which the classical and literary language was replaced by the folk and colloquial language of the Chinese population.

In the traditional Chinese language, the closest equivalent to the Western term of “religion” is *jiao*, as seen in the cases of *rujiao*, *daojiao*, and *fojiao*, or Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism respectively.²⁰ *Jiao* in these cases is understood as the teachings or guiding doctrines of Confucius, Laozi, and Buddha. Although all three traditions can be seen as institutionalized systems embracing rituals, disciplines, and doctrines, the words *rujiao*, *daojiao*, and *fojiao* originally do not imply the sense of “system.”²¹ From an etymological point of view, these three words in their original sense do not converge with the semantics of the Western terms of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. It is in this sense that *jiao*, as well as *zong* and *dao*, is understood as belonging to the traditional vocabulary which in turn is believed to be unable to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue conditioned by the paradigms of modernity. Therefore, all the three terms are deficient of what the Western concept of religion implies to the modern mind, though through compounds they still participate in significations in connection with religious sects and doctrines. In fact, since its introduction to China, the Western term of “religion,” coined as *zongjiao* in the modern Chinese language, has superseded *jiao*, *zong*, and *dao* in representing the concept of religion.

¹⁹ Hengyu, “Lun Zongjiao,” *Shijie Hongming Zhexue Jikan*, 1998, vol.3.

²⁰ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.28.

²¹ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.29.

It is still not clear how the Western term of religion was specifically introduced to and transformed in the modern Chinese language due to the shortage of research on this matter.²² But it is commonly maintained that it was first translated into Japanese as *shukyo*, and then swiftly adopted by Chinese intellectuals (pronounced as *zongjiao*).²³ As a matter of fact, the compound *zongjiao* had existed in the Chinese vocabulary long before it was chosen to designate the term “religion” in the modern age. It is a traditional word renovated and stamped with a modern meaning. According to Hengyu, *zongjiao* as a combination of *zong* (sect) and *jiao* (teaching) had been in broad circulation in the Zen Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE).²⁴ In the Zen texts *Wudeng Huiyuan* and *Zongjing Lu*, the word *zongjiao* appears ten times, with *zong* and *jiao* each having different implications. While *jiao* means the teachings of Buddha, *zong* refers to the teachings of Buddha’s disciples; *zong* belongs to the domain of *jiao*, and *jiao* guides the principles of *zong*. When used as a combination, however, *zongjiao* means the teachings and doctrines of Buddhism in general.²⁵ As a specific designation of Buddhism, *zongjiao* in its original sense is different from its modern usage as a generic term coined to translate the Western term of “religion.” But it would certainly be mistaken to deny the semantic connection between its original meaning and its modern connotations. To some extent, the transformation of *zongjiao* in the Chinese textuality parallels the linguistic evolution of “religion” in Western languages, both indicating a shift from a metaphysical

²² As far as I am concerned, so far no systematic investigation has been done on how the term “religion” was introduced to and transformed in the modern Chinese language.

²³ Jordan Paper asserts that *zongjiao* has been used as the standard Chinese translation for “religion” since the beginning of the 20th century. See Jordan Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany; State University of New York Press, 1995), p.2.

²⁴ Hengyu, “Lun Zongjiao,” *Shijie Hongming Zhexue Jikan*, 1998, vol.3.

²⁵ *Ci Yuan* (Origins of Words) (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1988), p.441.

sense of religiosity to a historical sense of institution.²⁶ Perhaps the primary difference between the two transformations is that, while the former is abrupt and superimposed from without, the latter is spontaneous and gradual. But both of them have witnessed the reification of the phenomenon of “religion” as a result of the establishment of modern academic disciplines.

The question of how *zongjiao* (religion) with its modern implications was inculcated in the Chinese mentality deserves coordinated efforts from the disciplines of history, philosophy, linguistics, and religious studies. Above anything else, the abrupt adoption of *zongjiao* by Chinese intellectuals to designate “religion” mirrors the bitter nature of the Sino-West encounter. The intellectual equilibrium of traditional establishments was shattered to give way to a wholesale import of Western academic disciplines and norms. It is in this context that the traditional term *zongjiao* was employed as an expedient to carry out the unprecedented mission. If it is hardly surprising when Japanese first used the term *shukyo* to mean Christianity instead of religion in general,²⁷ then it is even less so that *zongjiao* went through a similar transformation in the Chinese context. Jordan Paper claims that *zongjiao* was primarily applied to Christianity with extension to other religions of alien origin in China, such as Buddhism and Islam.²⁸ This judgment is fairly justifiable as far as the modern adoption of *zongjiao* is concerned. While Paper might have failed to realize the aboriginal roots of the term *zongjiao*,²⁹ his observation does touch on the significance of its transformation in the Chinese context. In fact, it is

²⁶ On the transformation of “religion” in Western languages, see Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, and Platvoet & Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*.

²⁷ See Hardacre, *Shinto and the State*, pp.63, 177n15.

²⁸ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.2.

²⁹ The case of Julia Ching is a clear example of this mistake. She claims that the word *zongjiao* did not exist in the Chinese vocabulary until the late 19th century. See Ching, *Chinese Religions*, p.2.

precisely through its application to Christianity that *zongjiao* is transformed from a “natural concept” to a “technical concept,”³⁰ or from a specific designation to a generic term. The aboriginal implication of *zongjiao* thus gives way to a brand new meaning superimposed by the Western concept “religion.” From this point on, *zongjiao* has been consistently used for any religion that is to some degree institutionalized.

Regardless of its obscure origin, *zongjiao* with its superimposed signification of “religion” has steadily made its way into the modern Chinese vocabulary. Not only has *zongjiao* now been incorporated into the Chinese semiotic system, it has also become popular and vigorous in modern Chinese narratives. The term *zongjiao* in its own right can now participate in the Chinese signifying process no less functionally than its counterpart “religion” can in Western languages. Smith is surely right that the West is unable to answer the question of whether Confucianism is a religion, as far as the dispute on definitions of religion is concerned. But it is rather a generic problem entrenched in the Western conceptualization of religion, with the case of defining Confucianism being just one particular example. On the other hand, given the modern transformation of the term *zongjiao*, Smith is certainly wrong in saying that China is never able to ask the question. Once *zongjiao* has been incorporated into the modern semiotic system, it can participate in the signifying process with full integrity. Sure enough, the problem of defining Confucianism still lingers on, but certainly not in Smith’s sense.

This having been said, there is no way to determine that the difficulty of defining Confucianism in the Chinese context is less intimidating than in the Western context. It will probably never be the case. To put it simply, Chinese scholars are confronted with

³⁰ On the difference between “natural concept” and “technical concept,” see Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.501-503.

additional difficulty in constructing the concept of religion besides its etymological obscurity.³¹ That is to say, in addition to the fact that Chinese scholars share the same problem of conceptualizing religion with Western scholars, they have to overcome the extra difficulty that can be attributed to two institutional factors in Chinese academies: first, the academic discipline of religious studies in China was not created until the 1960's, mainly because of the political and social turmoil in the 20th century; second, due to the ideological rigidity of the Chinese Communist Party, who took power in 1949, the general attitude toward religion is still largely conditioned and prescribed by the doctrines of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

Study of Religion as an Academic Discipline

The study of religion as an academic discipline was not immediately created along with the introduction of the Western term “religion” to the Chinese vocabulary. In fact, due to the political and social turmoil of modern China, it was well into the 20th century before there emerged any sign of academic interest in exploring the realm of religion at all. The initial exploration of such interest started with introducing the achievements of religious studies in the Western academics. For instance, in 1923, the journal *Xinli* (Psychology) published Deng Cuiying's article “The Religious Consciousness of Children” (“Ertong zhi Zongjiao Yishi”), mainly introducing the psychology of religion for children in the United States and Japan.³² In the 1930's, a book titled *Zongjiao yu Renge* (Religion and Personality) was trying to tackle the relation between religion and

³¹ Evidently, the conceptualization of *zongjiao* encounters more difficulty in the Chinese textuality than that of religion does in the Western textuality, due to the underdevelopment of religious studies as an academic discipline in China.

³² *Zongjiao Da Cidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Religion) (Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1998), p.12.

personality by applying psychological theories to analyze the characters in the Bible.³³

During the same period, some Western missionaries also wrote books on pastoral psychology in order to boost their missionary work. But in general, all the publications and researches on religion during this period focused on specific aspects of religion, and there was no systematic introduction of religious studies as an academic discipline.

In 1964, the Institute for Research on World Religions (Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiusuo) was created within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This is the first time the study of religion as an academic discipline gained institutional existence. The institute was dedicated to studying the doctrines of the three major world religions: Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as their history and present situation.³⁴ But the institute suffered a huge setback in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) before it resumed functioning in 1977. In the late 1970's, several provincial academies of social sciences started creating sections devoted to the study of religion, mainly focusing on certain aspects of a religion. Meanwhile, more and more universities began to develop institutes of religious studies, often as part of a philosophy department. However, despite its progress in the past two decades, the study of religion overall is still in its infant age, and its prospects are often limited by several factors: the general attitude toward religion is still negative and suspicious; the methodological focus is on textual and historical studies; and available social science methodologies are nearly a century out of date.³⁵

Since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, the Marxist ideology has cast a big shadow on the general understanding of religion. The most famous definition

³³ *Zongjiao Da Cidian*, p.12.

³⁴ Julian F. Pas, ed., *The Turning of the Tide: Religion in China Today* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.17.

³⁵ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.21.

of religion came from Karl Marx's declaration: religion is an "opiate of the people."³⁶ Engels' definition of religion also gained a solid hold on the Chinese mind: religion is the "fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life."³⁷ Although the religious rights of every citizen have been written into every PRC constitution since 1954,³⁸ religion in general was seen as an enemy of the state, as a reactionary group which might boycott the sublime goals and objectives of socialist reconstruction. This negative attitude towards religion culminated in the ten years' chaos of the Cultural Revolution, with all religious practices suppressed and religious personnel dismissed. The ideological rigidity in understanding religion did not disappear until the mid-1980's. In an article written by a research fellow of the Institute for Research on World Religions, religion is discussed as a universal human phenomenon, and the dominant aspects of Chinese religion as well as other aspects of indigenous religion are discussed as important subjects of study.³⁹ Soon afterwards, a more standard definition of religion was introduced in the introductory chapter of *Religious Questions Under Socialism in China* and the religion volume of the *Chinese Encyclopedia*, published in 1987 and 1988 respectively.⁴⁰

In the excerpts from both the *Chinese Encyclopedia* and *Religious Questions Under Socialism in China*, the theoretical constructions of religion are still attributable to the influences of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. But they do reflect a more scholarly and less doctrinaire approach when compared to the dogmatic understanding of religion in the

³⁶ Richard C. Bush Jr., *Religion in Communist China* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), p.22.

³⁷ Bush Jr., *Religion in Communist China*, p.23.

³⁸ Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy & Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p.1.

³⁹ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.20.

⁴⁰ MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p.104.

past decades. According to both works, religion is understood as “both an ideology and a complex social phenomenon.”⁴¹ In order to break the grip of ideological rigidity, a more scientifically oriented methodology is recommended for the study of religion. “It is not enough to rely on philosophical debate and logical inference for research on religion. Philosophers should come down from their lofty, abstract stratosphere and get close to their research subjects in order to understand the thoughts and feelings of religious believers and the position and function of religion in society.”⁴² This new orientation immediately moves beyond the traditional explanation of religion in terms of economic and social determinism upheld by the Marxist ideology. According to the new methodology, religion is viewed as a social and historical phenomenon that should be interpreted as well as explained. For the first time since 1949, religion is no longer regarded as just a subject of philosophical and logical explanation, but also eligible for phenomenological studies by social scientists.

Since the late 1980's, Chinese scholars have shown increasing interest in discussing the place and future of religion in a modern society, though the general attitude towards religion was still somehow suspicious and indifferent at that time. One of the leading features in the study of religion is that most scholars have moved beyond the constraint of the Marxist ideology. Although some scholars still use Marxist terminology and lean heavily towards classical Marxist views on religion, the academic atmosphere is freer and more spontaneous than the debates in the past. In the academic circle, there is a general consensus on the existence of religious faiths in a modern society, and most scholars are agreed about the value and contribution of religion. On the other hand, the scholarship's

⁴¹ MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p.109.

⁴² MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p.104.

increasing encounter with Western social sciences seems to be engendering a new understanding of the possibilities of religious studies. By the end of the 1990's, many sub-disciplines of religious studies have been established, such as sociology of religion, psychology of religion, phenomenology of religion, ecology of religion, and so on. Meanwhile, many inter-disciplinary studies, such as religion and philosophy, religion and literature, religion and esthetics, religion and politics, etc., have drawn tremendous attention and enthusiasm from across the academics of social sciences.⁴³

Constructing Religion in the Chinese Textuality

As academic interest in religious studies grows rapidly in recent years, theoretical construction of religion becomes increasingly urgent for Chinese scholars. The Marxist ideology may not dominate the scholarship any more, but it still finds resonance among common people and scholars alike. The understanding of religion is often contested between the Marxist persuasion and post-Marxist orientations, and there are as many definitions of religion as there are scholars. In spite of this, there does exist a consensus on the orientation and methodology in approaching religion as a social and historical phenomenon. In 1998, the Shanghai Lexicon Press published *Zongjiao Dacidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Religion).⁴⁴ The *Dictionary* is significant to the discipline of religious studies in that it not only includes updated materials of various religions, but also provides the latest conceptual construction of religion. Since the chief editors are from the Institute for Research on World Religions, the theoretical approach of the

⁴³ *Zongjiao Dacidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Religion), p.13.

⁴⁴ *Zongjiao Dacidian* is the updated version of *Zongjiao Cidian* (Dictionary of Religion), which was published in 1981. Ren Jiyu, the director of the Institute for Research on World Religions, was the chief editor of both versions of the dictionary.

Dictionary can be seen as representing how religion is conceptualized in current Chinese academics. To get a sense of this conceptualization, it is necessary to quote in length the definition of religion presented in the introduction of the *Dictionary*:

Religion, which emerged when the human society progressed to a certain level, is both a form of social ideology and a cultural and socio-historical phenomenon. The distinguishing feature of religion is the belief that beyond this world there exists a supernatural/superhuman mystical force or entity. The followers of religion believe that this mystical force transcends and governs everything, has absolute authority over the world, dictates the progress of nature and society, and decides the fate and fortune of humanity. Upon this mystical force, human beings are moved by a feeling of awe and worship, which eventually gives rise to the establishment of theological doctrines and ritual activities. Religion essentially illustrates human being's acknowledgement of their finitude in face of an alienating power, and their effort of self-transcendence. Religion suggests human being's strong sense of self-consciousness, usually manifested as contemplation of the relationship between the subject and the objective world. The concepts and ideas of religion as certain forms of worldview always participate in and explore the development and meaning of humanity. The belief systems and social organizations of religion are important components of culture and society.⁴⁵

The above quotation shows a strong attempt to establish a synthetic definition of religion from social, historical, and theological perspectives. Since religious feeling is held as the pivotal element of the phenomenon, religion is thus defined as a sense of transcendence embodied in a social, historical system. The key point of the definition is the emphasis on the religious encounter between the human consciousness and the superhuman force. This definition suggests influences from Western scholars, noticeably Frazer, Muller, Schleiermacher, Otto, Tillich, and others.⁴⁶ Curiously, the *Dictionary* finds no problem in emphasizing the theistic dimension of religion. In fact, the doctrine of "belief in God" is viewed as the essence and foundation of all religions.⁴⁷ This essentialist approach gives priority to the notion of God in determining what is a religion and what is not. Given the status and prestige of the *Dictionary*, it is very unlikely that

⁴⁵ *Zongjiao Dacidian*, p.1. This is my own translation.

⁴⁶ *Zongjiao Dacidian*, p.2.

⁴⁷ *Zongjiao Dacidian*, p.2.

the current theoretical construction of religion by Chinese scholars could shy away from this essentialist orientation. Accordingly, to understand the contemporary controversy on Confucian religiosity, one needs to take this theoretical background into account.

The *Dictionary* prescribes three factors in constituting what is a religion: theological doctrines, rituals, and religious organizations.⁴⁸ Though its applicability to the religious expression of Chinese society remains questionable, this tripartite construction seems to have gained considerable popularity among many scholars. In fact, many participants in the debate on Confucian religiosity frequently appeal to this format to advance their understanding of religion.⁴⁹ Depending on whether or not to recognize the existence of these three factors, scholars are sharply divided in their approach to Confucian religiosity. It seems that the primary problem for the approvers of Confucianism as a religion, according to this approach, is how to interpret the “unique” way these religious elements are embedded in Confucianism. There are also some scholars who, confused by the complex manifestation of Confucian religiosity, decline to employ this format in their approach to Confucianism.⁵⁰

The difficulty of fitting Confucianism into an essentialist definition of religion goes beyond the rhetorical level. The “marginality” of Confucianism to this format illustrates the very deficiency of the definition in addressing the particularity of Confucian religious manifestations. At this point, the inner structure of the definition itself has to be called into question. Since the definition of the *Dictionary* holds the doctrine of “belief in God” as an essential element in defining a religion, only those phenomena that have a place for

⁴⁸ *Zongjiao Dacidian*, p.2.

⁴⁹ Xing Dongtian, “1978-2000 nian de Rujiao Yanjiu: Xueshu Huigu yu Sikao” (The Research on Confucian Religion from 1978 to 2000: An Academic Review), *Xueshujie* (Academia), no. 2, 2003.

⁵⁰ Xing Dongtian, “1978-2000 nian de Rujiao Yanjiu: Xueshu Huigu yu Sikao.”

deity can be admitted into the family of religions. This theistic approach is critically challenged when it is applied to discuss the religiosity of Confucianism, where the notion of divinity has a very controversial and obscure presence in its narratives. There are only two possibilities: either Confucianism is not “a religion” despite its religious dimension, or the definition of religion itself is problematic. In any case, the question on Confucian religiosity cannot be accounted for without investigating the Confucian notion of divinity on the one hand and the theoretical construction of religion on the other. What is evident in the controversy is that, which Confucian texts are given the primary importance,⁵¹ and how the notion of divinity is interpreted in the related texts, are the two crucial steps in making up an argument. Depending on the scholar’s specific perspective and orientation, Confucianism can be interpreted either as an atheistic tradition with a pivotal quality of humanism, or as a theistic tradition with a “unique” implication of inner transcendence. Therefore, it can be said that the sharp division in these two lines of interpretation cannot be easily abolished as long as the essentialist definition of religion prevails.

Linguistic Ambiguity of Terms: *Rujia*, *Rujiao*, *Ruxue*

While the controversy on Confucian religiosity has been greatly complicated by political, cultural, and ideological agendas in Chinese history, the first step towards resolving the complication has to start with dismantling the linguistic obscurity of the question. To Western scholars, the primary concern in defining Confucianism with respect to religion is often identified as the difficulty in applying the originally euro-

⁵¹ Confucian canons consist of two parts: *Sishu* (Four Books) and *Wujing* (Five Canons). *Sishu* (*Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*) are believed to be composed by Confucius and his disciples, whereas *Wujing* (*Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Rites*, *Spring and Autumn*) are the classics that Confucius had transmitted and used to teach his disciples.

centric concept of religion to a possibly “unique,” sometimes even undefinable, tradition. To a certain degree, Chinese scholars are faced with the same problem simply due to the wholesale importing of the Western conception of religion. In addition to this theoretical challenge, however, Chinese scholars are also confronted with the problem of linguistic ambiguity, a problem that would probably prevent them from asking the question on Confucian religiosity in the first place. Although the problem of linguistic ambiguity is also present in the Western approach to the question on Confucian religiosity, it poses a much greater challenge to the same question proceeded in the Chinese textuality. Hence, failing to tackle this linguistic problem will inevitably compromise the validity of the theoretical orientation in approaching Confucian religiosity.

A thorough investigation of the linguistic ambiguity of the question on Confucian religiosity is necessary and fundamental to understanding both the significance and complication of the question. If the linguistic ambiguity in the Western textuality can be primarily attributed to the semantic ramifications of constructs such as “Confucianism” and “religion,” the problem in the Chinese textuality is rather complicated by the Chinese counterparts of the Western term “Confucianism,” namely, *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*.⁵² The “untidy” quality of these terms, mirroring the very spontaneous nature of a native system, signifies their intrinsic resistance against a theorizing attempt that is based upon Western epistemological principles and paradigms. In contrast, the “holistic” and “panoramic” vision conjured by the Western term of “Confucianism” suggests its capability of sanctioning the Confucian tradition from a rather inclusive and macroscopic perspective.

⁵² There are a number of terms in the Chinese language that can designate, though with various degrees of accuracy and utility, what is referred to as “Confucianism” in Western languages. Hence, Confucianism can be called as *rujia*, *rujiao*, *ruxue*, *kongjia*, *kongjiao*, *kongxue*, *daoxue*, or even *ru* in a more generic sense, though the first three terms have gained much higher visibility in actual usage.

This linguistic discrepancy between the Chinese and the Western construction of the question on Confucian religiosity highlights the epistemological problems embedded in the conceptualization of Confucianism with regard to Western paradigms.

The Holistic and Panoramic Vision of “Confucianism”

At first glance, “Is Confucianism a religion?” appears to be a well-established and unequivocal question: whether Confucianism can be admitted into the category of religion, one that is originally Western and yet continuously experiencing cross-cultural ramifications. But the seeming “tidiness” of the question can only be possible in the Western textuality. To be sure, the etymological relationship of “Confucius” and “Confucianism”⁵³ in Western languages immediately reminds one of that of “Christ” and “Christianity,” “Mohammedan” and “Mohammedanism,” or “Buddha” and “Buddhism,” and we may extend the inquiry further.⁵⁴ However, the parallelism in these signifying correspondences tells nothing more than etymological expediency.⁵⁵ The way the idiom of “Confucius” is construed in the narratives of Confucianism is simply not in parallel to that of “Christ” in Christianity.

The particularity of the social and historical manifestations of Confucianism and of Christianity defies any hasty analogy between the two traditions by appealing to a linguistic imagination. The conditions under which the word “Confucianism” was created

⁵³ Both the terms of “Confucius” and “Confucianism,” though spelt differently from today, were invented by the Jesuits to designate Kongzi (c.551-479BC) and his teachings respectively. See Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.ix; and Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization*, (Duke University Press, 1997), pp.71, 324n2.

⁵⁴ W. C. Smith argues that the appearance of terms like “Judaism,” “Christianity,” “Islam,” “Daoism,” “Confucianism,” “Buddhism,” etc., is peculiar to a 19th century reification of the concept of religion. See Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp.1-19, 51-79, 124-152, 193-202.

⁵⁵ The term of “Confucianism” with its current spelling was coined in 1862, along with the creation of “Boudhism” (Buddhism) in 1801 and “Tauism” (Taoism) in 1839. See Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.4.

by the Jesuits to designate “the sect of the *literati*”⁵⁶ determine it could not construe a faithful reflection of the subtleties and complexities that are heuristically registered by *rujia*, *rujiao*, *ruxue*, or more generically, *ru*.⁵⁷ Neither is the term *ru* derived from *Kongzi* (the Chinese counterpart of the Latinised name “Confucius”) in the Chinese language as “Confucianism” is from “Confucius” in Western languages, nor is there a consensus on which of the three largely overlapping and fiercely competing words is most equivalent to “Confucianism” in actual usage.

For Westerners the term of “Confucianism” immediately conjures a holistic and panoramic vision encompassing its fascination on the Chinese tradition as a whole. In fact, it is through the concepts of “Confucius” and “Confucianism” that the West has been bound in imagining the East since the late 17th century. For the early Jesuits, Confucius and Chinese civilization to some degree were synonymous, and the term “Confucius” or “Confucianism” endured as a metonym for anything Chinese.⁵⁸ As Lionel Jensen has insightfully observed, “Confucianism has long been considered the definitive ethos of the Chinese—their civil religion, their official cult, their intellectual tradition. Indeed, the term ‘Confucianism’ has performed such varied service as a charter concept of Chinese culture for the West that it has become indistinguishable from what it signifies—China.”⁵⁹

Indeed, the metonymic quality of “Confucius” and “Confucianism” should never be underestimated, not just because they were invented by the Jesuits to comprehend the

⁵⁶ See Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.2.

⁵⁷ In order to avoid terminological confusion, some scholars suggest that *rujiao* be translated as Confucian Religion, *rujia* Confucianist (School), and *ruxue* Confucianist Scholarship. See He Guanghu, “Zhongguo Wenhua de Gen yu Hua—Tan Ruxue de Fanben yu Kaixin,” *Yuandao*, no.2 (Tuanjie Chubanshe, 1995).

⁵⁸ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, pp.4, 117.

⁵⁹ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.4.

Chinese civilization in the first place. While lacking Chinese counterparts in the strictly literal sense, these terms have a descriptive function sufficient for the Jesuits to enable cross-cultural understanding. But it should also be noted that both “Confucius” and “Confucianism” are understood as interpretive constructs rather than representations of native categories. “They are representations of the seventeenth-century European reading of the Jesuit missionary experience among late Ming Chinese, representations that were employed, and have been preserved, as elements within a universal system of classification by language, chronology, science, and faith.”⁶⁰ Since the seventeenth century, these terms have been consistently exploited in shaping the ways and paradigms upon which the West has strived to understand China. Even today, the Western conceptualization of Chinese culture continues to be processed through the paradigmatic leverage of these conceptual constructs. As a consequence, the holistic and panoramic vision conjured by these terms has been continuously encoded into the very process of interpreting Chinese tradition by Westerners.

The utility of terms such as “Confucius” and “Confucianism” in the Western signifying process has not been questioned despite their possible misrepresentations, partly because they are now an entrenched part of Western languages, and to use any other terms would cause unnecessary confusion.⁶¹ But we need to keep in mind that the entrenchment of “Confucianism” and other constructs in Western languages would inevitably lead to a sanction of axiomatic and uncritical use. The very “tidiness” of terms such as “Confucianism” in the Western semiotic system is precisely derived from their holistic and panoramic quality. This “tidiness” is perfectly exemplified in the way the

⁶⁰ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.141.

⁶¹ Jordan D. Paper, *The Fu-tzu: A Post-Han Confucian Text* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1987), p.6.

question on Confucian religiosity is processed in the Western textuality. Whenever the word “Confucianism” is uttered, a bird-eye view is squarely sanctioned over the signifying process, with the signifier (the word “Confucianism”) and the signified (the conceptualization of Confucianism) establishing a circular and exclusive one-on-one correspondence.⁶² No matter which way to approach it, the format of the question on Confucian religiosity in the Western textuality appears to be well defined, whereas the processing of the same question in the Chinese textuality is constantly plagued by terminological obscurity in the first place.

The Obscure Origin of *Ru*

For over two thousand years of Chinese history, *ru*, more than any other terms, has been prominent in narratives that make up the quintessence of Chinese culture. It has become a paradigmatic term upon which the whole tradition of Chinese culture in general, and Confucianism in particular, has been construed. Textual evidence has clearly showed that *ru* gained its prominence during the two centuries preceding Qin unification (221 BCE), and even before it was identified with the lineage of Confucius.⁶³ The earliest scribal evidence of the character *ru* is found in the *Analects (Lunyu)*, compiled in the 5th century, where Confucius taught his disciples to be a *ru* of virtuous gentlemen (*junzi ru*) and not a morally deficient man or a vulgar *ru* (*xiaoren ru*).⁶⁴ What we can learn from this textual evidence is that *ru* as the designation of a specific group of people has existed

⁶² The terms of “Confucius” and “Confucianism” were originally constructed as metonymies by the Jesuits to refer to “China, Chineseness, and Chinese tradition.” Although they were more and more accurately delineated and detailed with the growth of Europe’s knowledge on China, their holistic and panoramic vision has remained. See Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, pp.34, 50,142.

⁶³ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.155.

⁶⁴ *Analects (Lunyu)*, 6:13.

at the time of Confucius, and that the *ru* group has split into at least two sections, namely, *junzi ru* and *xiaoren ru*.

There has been considerable variation in the significance of *ru* in spite of its high profile in textual narratives. In fact, the semantic ambiguity of *ru* is salient throughout the early literature. By all accounts, it is “a name of obscure origin,”⁶⁵ and debates about its etymology and semantics are not easily resolved. From the time of Confucius to the early 20th century, there are very scarce sources that have recorded self-conscious reflection on the term. The first attempt to expound the meaning of *ru* occurs in the work of Liu Xin (?-23CE), who traced the origin of *ru* to a government office (*situ zhi guan*, Ministry of Education). According to Liu Xin, the function of *ru* was to “assist the ruler, follow the way of the yin-yang, and educate the people (*zhu renjun, shun yinyang, ming jiaohua*).”⁶⁶ By allocating the formation of *ru* to the early years of the Zhou Dynasty (1100?-256 BCE), Liu Xin thus attributed the characteristic of *ru* to its devotion to the mastery of the “six classics,”⁶⁷ and to the cultivation of moral principles such as humaneness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*). As a distinctive social group, *ru* pursued the distant ideals of the ancient sage-kings by following the exemplary role of Confucius.⁶⁸ But *ru* was not identified with the followers of Confucius until a much later time, when the school of Confucius had been recognized as prominent among the “Hundred Schools.”⁶⁹

Despite the obscure origin of *ru*, it is generally agreed that *ru* as a profession was closely associated with ritual dance, music and religious ceremonies. Etymological

⁶⁵ See A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978), pp.6.

⁶⁶ *Hanshu* (History of the Han Dynasty) (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1997), p.1728.

⁶⁷ The “six classics” (*liu jing*) refers to: the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

⁶⁸ *Hanshu*, 1997, p. 1728.

⁶⁹ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.18.

evidence has shown that the character *ru* shares the same root with those for “weaklings” and “cowards,” suggesting that the name *ru* is probably derived from the nature of the profession, registered by softness, suppleness, and flexibility.⁷⁰ The first Chinese philologist Xu Shen (58?-147?) simply defined *ru* as “soft” and believed *ru* was the title for scholars (*shu shi*) who educated the people with the six arts.”⁷¹ Following the interpretation of Xu Shen, *ru* was since commonly understood as a certain group of people who committed to Confucian self-cultivation and noble etiquette by mastering the six arts, and who were especially aware of their own refinement and manners. However, this etymological elucidation of *ru* by Xu Shen appears to be less than satisfactory to Lionel Jensen. According to Jensen, to interpret *ru* as *rou* (soft) and *nuo* (weak and timid) is no more than paronomasia, simply because those three characters happen to be in a phonetic cluster.⁷² Jensen is certainly poignant in pointing out a common problem in the traditional scholarship of exegesis in Confucianism. Nevertheless, he has probably gone too far by shrugging off the significance of phonetic approach altogether, an approach that is pertinent to the unique characteristics of Chinese linguistic structure.

Other than Liu Xin and Xu Shen, there had been very few people interested in the etymology of *ru* throughout the pre-modern history. Neither had there been much dispute on the meaning of *ru*. With the introduction of Western scientific methodologies at the beginning of the 20th century, however, Chinese scholars started to reassess the meaning and significance of *ru*. Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936) and Hu Shih (1891-1962) emerged as the most prominent scholars in this field. Zhang believed that in ancient times *ru* was a general term with a range of references, from sorcerers to intellectuals to government

⁷⁰ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.20.

⁷¹ *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981), p.366.

⁷² Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.170.

officials, but later it became a specific name for those who taught and transmitted the Confucian classics.⁷³ Hu Shih claimed that *ru* referred to the adherents of the Shang Dynasty (c.1600-c.1100 BCE) who because of their expertise in religious rituals were employed as priests by the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100?-770 BCE). When the Western Zhou Dynasty declined shortly before the time of Confucius, these professionals lost their privilege and social status, and became a group of people who lived on their knowledge and skills in rituals and ceremonies.⁷⁴

Regardless of the varied interpretations of *ru*, many scholars agree that *ru* as a social group has to do with ritual practices on the one hand, and Confucian classics on the other. Although the historical transformation of this social group is still disputable, it is agreed that there was a role shift of *ru* from the official department to various areas of social life. During different periods of history, the *ru* group became distinctive for their skills in state rituals and in official and private education. The term *ru* was also gradually extended to become a specific term for those who had skills of ritual, history, poetry, music, mathematics and archery, and who lived off their knowledge of all kinds of ceremonies and of many other subjects.⁷⁵ Confucius as the greatest figure in this social group had decisively developed and transformed the *ru* tradition by compiling and editing the Confucian classics. By the time of the Warring States period, Confucius had been recognized as the highest figure in the *ru* tradition, as indicated by Han Fei (280?-233 BCE). Not long after that, the tradition of *ru* was totally identified with the lineage initiated by Confucius and maintained by his followers.

⁷³ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.19.

⁷⁴ Hu Shih, "Shuo Ru" (Discussion on *Ru*), in *Hu shih Wencun* (Taipei: Yuandong Tushu Gongsi, 1953) vol.4.

⁷⁵ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.21.

Ambiguity of Terms: *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*

Although *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* all refer to Confucianism in a general sense, each of them emphasizes different aspects of the *ru* tradition. Literally speaking, *rujia* is usually referred to as “the sect of the literati,” *rujiao* “the teaching of the literati,” and *ruxue* “the learning of the literati.”⁷⁶ But none of them can command a holistic and panoramic vision as the term “Confucianism” does in the Western textuality. As a result, the vision of the question on Confucian religiosity in the Chinese textuality is often obscured by the fragmentary and conflicting persuasions of these three terms. Which word to choose to process the question is predetermined by and in turn supports the scholar’s position and attitude. In general, while the protagonists of “Confucianism as a religion” are likely to favor *rujiao*, the opponents usually prefer either *rujia* or *ruxue*. The processing of the question on Confucian religiosity thus assumes three different versions in the Chinese textuality. Since all the three terms can sanction a selective and filtered perception of the signified (Confucianism), the “tidiness” of the question in the Western textuality is often corresponded with selectivity and circularity in the Chinese context.

To approach the question on Confucian religiosity in the Chinese textuality, one has to first and foremost overcome the semantic obscurity of *rujia*, *rujiao* and *ruxue*. This semantic obscurity is present not just between the three terms, but also within each of them. First, there is a signifying confusion caused by the fierce competition of the three terms over the representation of Confucianism. Second, there is no way to take any of the three terms as being consistent in their respective representations. To be specific, an indiscriminate use of *rujia* will likely lead to a confusion of its implications, because

⁷⁶ See Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, pp.26-30.

there is a difference between *rujia* as a generic term and as a specific designation. The difficulty of employing *rujiao* is no less detrimental, due to the term's three different layers of signification, with each layer inextricably bound to a specific semantic context. As for the term *ruxue*, it is always necessary to differentiate its metonymic quality from its fundamental implication.

Confucianism as *rujia*

Rujia as a compound first appeared in the chapter of *Yiwenzhi* (Discourse on Arts and Literature) in *Hanshu* (History of the Han Dynasty), where it was referred to as either the Confucian (*ru*) School or individuals of the school. "Those so called *rujia*, are probably the ones who originate from the Ministry of Education, assisting the ruler, following the way of yin and yang, and educating [the people]."⁷⁷ *Yiwenzhi* further indicates, "in total there are one hundred and eighty nine scholars (*jia*)," among them "*ru* fifty three...*dao* thirty seven...*yin yang* twenty one." Here *jia* as a generic term refers to individuals who belong to a specific school during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE). Thus *rujia* means the scholars of the *ru* school, and by the same token, *daojia* the scholars of the *dao* school, *yinyangjia* the scholars of the *yin yang* school, and so on. But later in the same chapter, *Yiwenzhi* also says "among those ten schools (*jia*) of the scholars, only nine schools (*jia*) are worth serious consideration."⁷⁸ In this case *jia* means a philosophical or literary school, with *rujia* being just one of the *baijia* (hundred schools). Both implications of *rujia* have endured throughout the Chinese history, and

⁷⁷ *Hanshu*, 1997, p.1728.

⁷⁸ *Hanshu*, 1997, p.1746.

nowadays the term is still used to designate either the Confucian tradition as a totality or individual Confucian scholars.

One of the semantic problems in the debate on Confucian religiosity can be attributed to the confusion between *rujia* as a generic term and as a specific designation. As a generic term, *rujia* could mean all the fundamentals that make up the quintessence of the Confucian tradition; but as a specific designation, *rujia* only refers to the lineage consisting of Confucius and his disciples who were closely following his initiatives. It is this specific designation *rujia* that is often translated as the Confucian School, which chronologically does not stretch beyond the Warring States period. In other words, while *rujia* as a generic term refers to the whole Confucian tradition, as a specific designation it specifically means one of the “Hundred Schools”. However, in the debate on Confucian religiosity in the Chinese textuality, the semantic obscurity of *rujia* is easily taken advantage of by some scholars trying to establish their argument.

Confucianism as *rujiao*

Rujiao as a compound can also be traced back to early Chinese literatures. In the chapter of *Youxia Liezhuan* (Legends of the Wandering Knights) in *Shiji* (Records of History), Sima Qian states that the people of Lu are “all educated by *ru*” (*jie yi ru jiao*).⁷⁹ Here *ru* and *jiao* are linked together for the first time, though *jiao* serves as a verb, meaning “to educate.” One of the early references to *rujiao* as a doctrine is made in the chapter of *Xuandiji* (Biography of the Emperor Xuan) in *Jinshu* (History of the Jin Dynasty), where it says “to deepen study and broaden knowledge, and to follow the

⁷⁹ *Shiji* (Records of History) (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1997), p.3184.

doctrine of Confucianism (*rujiao*).”⁸⁰ Although *rujiao* (the Confucian doctrine) was considered prominent as early as in the Warring States period, it did not enjoy any political privilege until the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) of the Han Dynasty. Due to the state patronage from Emperor Wu, *rujiao* promptly became a dominant doctrine and a state ideology. This political marriage of *rujiao* laid the foundation for its eventual transformation to a status close to religious doctrine.

Despite its original implication as the Confucian doctrine, the modern application of *rujiao* is highly complicated and disputable. The very rhetoric in the dispute on *rujiao* is reminiscent of the controversy on the religiosity of Confucianism itself. The dispute in understanding *rujiao* is eventually attributable to how the term *jiao* is interpreted. There are three different implications of *jiao* when it is compounded with *ru* as *rujiao*.⁸¹ First of all, *jiao* is understood as the Confucian teaching by the early Confucian scholars, as is clearly illustrated in *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of Mean) “to cultivate the Way is called *jiao*,” and in *Mencius* “there are many ways of teaching (*jiao*).”⁸² The use of *rujiao* in the *Youxia Liezhuan* chapter of *Shiji* also belongs to this line of interpretation. Hence, *jiao* in this sense usually refers to specific contents and orientations of the Confucian teaching.

The second implication of *jiao* emerged when Buddhism and Taoism were elevated to the same status as Confucianism (*ru*) during the Wei and Jin periods (220-420 AD). Because of the bitter confrontation between these three traditions, some scholars tried to resolve the problem by integrating them into a combined institution called *san jiao* (three teachings). The earliest application of *jiao* in this sense is found in *Wushu* (Records of

⁸⁰ *Jinshu* (History of the Jin Dynasty) (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1997), p.1.

⁸¹ See Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji* (Collections of the Debate on the Confucian Religion) (Zongjiao Wenhua Chubanshe, 2000), p.112.

⁸² *Mencius*, 6B: 16.

Wu): “The ruler of Wu asks about the *san jiao*. The prime minister Kan Ze by answering says: when Confucius and Laozi are creating their teachings they follow the principle of Heaven, not daring to defy Heaven; when Buddha is creating his teachings, all the beings follow him.”⁸³ *Jiao* in this case is understood as the teachings or philosophical doctrines of the three traditions. Since the Wei and Jin periods, these three traditions were often approached as *sanjiao* in comparison and contrast, and were usually taken as necessary to maintain the social structure.⁸⁴ Modern scholars adopting this line of interpretation of *jiao* usually appear to be philosophically oriented.

The third interpretation of *rujiao* is a retrospective enterprise undertaken by modern Chinese scholars trying to read the Confucian tradition into a modern textuality. They believe that when Confucianism evolved into the stage of Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming periods (960-1644), it assumed a form of existence identical to that of Christianity, Buddhism and other religions.⁸⁵ *Rujiao* is thus understood neither as the specific contents and orientations of the Confucian teaching, nor its philosophical doctrines or scholarship, but rather as “*ru* the religion.” The Jesuits are the first to bring Christian conceptions of religion to the understanding of Confucianism. But quite understandably, for the sake of disseminating their own doctrines, they were reluctant to treat Confucianism as “a religion.” As the arch-reformer in the last period of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Kang Youwei (1858-1927) is the first Chinese thinker to adopt Christian paradigms to reconstruct Confucianism, hoping to promote Confucianism to the status of “state religion”. Kang’s failed efforts have left us the only legacy: the term

⁸³ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.113.

⁸⁴ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.114.

⁸⁵ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.114.

kongjiao,⁸⁶ a term not essentially different from *rujiao* but highlighting the pivotal role of Confucius (Kongzi) to Confucianism as “a religion.”

Among contemporary Chinese scholars, Ren Jiyu is the first one to enthusiastically interpret the term *rujiao* in the sense of religion. In many of Ren’s essays, the reader is often more impressed by his persistence in using the term *rujiao* than by his elucidation of the religiosity of Confucianism per se.⁸⁷ But Ren’s endeavor has made the word *rujiao* once again popular in the scholarship of Confucianism after decades’ oblivion. Following Ren Jiyu’s initiative, another scholar Li Shen has recently come up with a voluminous and controversial book *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (History of the Confucian Religion in China).⁸⁸ With the publication of this book, the term *rujiao*, together with the controversy on the religiosity of Confucianism, has gained tremendous visibility in an intellectual storm unseen in decades.

Confucianism as *ruxue*

Unlike *rujia* and *rujiao*, which often suggest a sense of lineage in the Confucian tradition, the term *ruxue* is more likely to direct attention to the traditional scholarship of Confucianism. One of the most important characteristics of the Confucian tradition is its serious and consistent commitment to the study and transmission of the classics. The first appearance of *ruxue* occurs in the chapter of *Wuzong Shijia* (Lineage of Wuzong) in *Shiji* (Records of History), “the Hejian Prince De is fond of the Confucian learning (*ruxue*),

⁸⁶ Although *kongjiao* as a term appeared as early as in *Hanshu*, it did not assume the sense of “Confucian religion” until Kang Youwei’s initiation at the turn of the 20th century.

⁸⁷ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.115.

⁸⁸ Li Shen, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1999 & 2000).

with dress and behavior always following the Confucians.”⁸⁹ *Ruxue* as a body of learning includes both the philosophy and scholarship of the Confucian tradition. It is commonly maintained that Confucianism as *ruxue* has been able to outlive its status as an orthodox ideology by its unflagging efforts to further learning. For this reason, many contemporary scholars prefer to name Confucianism as *ruxue* rather than *rujia* or *rujiao*, in recognition of the fact that the essence of Confucianism resides in its learning.⁹⁰

However, due to its multiple implications, the term of *ruxue*, just like *rujia* and *rujiao*, is not free from semantic ambiguity. It is often taken as a synonym of the totality of traditional Chinese culture, as a contemporary scholar has recently illustrated.⁹¹ According to this metonymic interpretation, the signification of *ruxue* stretches beyond the realm of Confucian learning. In an extended sense, *ruxue* can refer to any scholarship falling in the categories of *jing* (classics), *shi* (history), *zi* (philosophy), and *ji* (miscellaneous collections).⁹² Since these four categories include all the traditional fields of scholarship, it is not at all surprising that *ruxue* is applied to designate the whole Chinese tradition. Failing to realize the metonymic quality of *ruxue* will certainly prevent a thorough understanding of its semantic ambiguity. Therefore, when *ruxue* is extended to designate the totality of Chinese tradition and culture, it can only be counted as a folk category. Because of the shortage of articulation and stipulation, a folk category is often too obscure and indecisive to be useful in conceptualization. For this very reason, it is especially important to discern the multi-vocality of *ruxue* in the debate on Confucian religiosity.

⁸⁹ *Shiji*, 1997, p.3118.

⁹⁰ Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, p.30.

⁹¹ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.219.

⁹² Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.219.

For more than two thousand years, Confucianism as *ruxue* (Confucian learning) has gone through various transformations, which can be roughly divided into several major stages: the Confucian School, the Han exegesis of the classics, the Mysterious Learning of Wei-Jin periods, the Neo-Confucianism of Song-Ming periods, and the New Confucianism in the modern age. Along with the term *ruxue*, there has emerged a closely related term *xin ruxue*,⁹³ which is often employed to refer to the philosophical school that took shape during the 1920's in the wake of Sino-West encounter. *Xin ruxue* in this sense is usually translated as New Confucianism in differentiation to the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming periods. Bearing the metaphysical heritage of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, the *xin ruxue* school has committed itself to establishing the ontological foundation for modern values such as science and democracy, and to revolving the problem of meaning with regard to the Confucian notion of inner transcendence.

Distribution of *rujia*, *rujiao*, *ruxue*

To see how the “untidiness” of terms has complicated the controversy on Confucian religiosity, it is necessary to survey how the three terms, *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*, are actually distributed in the related discussions. The latest debate on Confucian religiosity has mainly materialized in two collections: the book *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji* (Collections of the Debate on Confucian Religion), and the online collection of “Ruxue yu Zongjiao Wenti Zhengming” (“Debate on the Confucian Learning and Religion”) in

⁹³ *Xin ruxue* and *xin rujia* are interchangeable in the sense of New Confucianism. There are two distinctive applications of *xin rujia*, the first of which refers to Neo-Confucianism which was developed during the Song (960-1279 AD) and Ming (1368-1644 AD) periods. The Principle School of Zhu Xi (1130-1200 AD) and the Mind School of Wang Yangming (1472-1528 AD) are the two primary sections of Neo-Confucianism. The second application of *xin rujia* refers to New Confucianism which emerged in the early 20th century in the wake of Sino-West encounter.

the website www.confucius2000.com. While the former was edited by Ren Jiyu and published in 2000, the latter saw its flourish in the spring of 2002. Both collections are in some way responding to the publication of the controversial book *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (History of the Confucian Religion in China) by Li Shen. The book *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji* includes 36 articles and two appendixes, whereas the online collection embraces 73 articles.⁹⁴ In the titles and subtitles of all the articles in Ren Jiyu's book, the word *rujiao* appears 22 times, *ruxue* 10 times, and *rujia* 3 times. In the titles and subtitles of the collection of "Debate on the Confucian Learning and Religion",⁹⁵ the word *rujiao* appears 21 times, *ruxue* 13 times, and *rujia* 11 times. The reason that the term *rujiao* enjoys far higher frequency than either *ruxue* or *rujia* is probably due to the fact that both collections specifically focus on the discussion of Confucian religiosity.

In *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, there are 20 titles that adopt one or more of the three terms *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*, and in some way are suggestive of the author's position on Confucian religiosity. Those who support Confucianism as a religion usually prefer the word *rujiao* to *rujia* and *ruxue*.⁹⁶ In contrast, those who oppose Confucianism as a religion usually prefer the word *rujia* or *ruxue* to *rujiao*, or, in many cases, use the word *rujiao* in a different way.⁹⁷ The tendency is also obvious in the website collection of

www.confucius2000.com. For many titles in the section of "Debate on Confucian

⁹⁴ This number is up to June 7th, 2003, excluding the commentaries on Li Shen's book *History of the Confucian Religion in China*.

⁹⁵ In the website www.confucius2000.com, the section "Debate on Confucian Learning and Religion" is divided into four columns: "on *History of the Confucian Religion in China*", "on the Confucian religion", "Confucian learning and religion", and "information and news." Most of the articles concerning Confucian religiosity come from the column of "Confucian learning and religion."

⁹⁶ Such tendency is shown in such titles: "On the Formation of *Rujiao*," "A Religion with Chinese Characteristics: *Rujiao*," "From *Fojiao* (Buddhism) to *Rujiao*," "*Rujiao* is Religion," "*Rujiao*: the State Religion of Chinese Dynasties," and etc.

⁹⁷ For the first case, we have such titles: "To Absorb the Philosophical Principles of Religion, or to Religionize *Ruxue*," "On *Ruxue* as Non-religion," "*Ruxue* and the Feudal-patriarchal Religion," "The 'Humanism' and 'Heaven-man Unification' of *Ruxue*"; for the second case, we have titles such as "Suspicion on *Rujiao*", "Analysis on '*Rujiao*'", "*Rujiao* Is not Religion", "Is *Rujiao* a Religion," and so on.

Learning and Religion,” the author’s position is usually discernable from the choice of *rujia*, *rujiao*, or *ruxue*.⁹⁸ Again, while those who approve the religiosity of Confucianism prefer the term *rujiao*, those who choose *rujia* or *ruxue* over *rujiao* usually decline to take Confucianism as a religion.⁹⁹ Both collections clearly show that the problem of linguistic ambiguity has often plagued the discussion on Confucian religiosity by rendering it in a circular and selective fashion. In some sense, the controversy on Confucian religiosity is largely due to the controversy over the use of particular terms.

However, it certainly would be naïve to speculate the author’s position on Confucian religiosity just by his/her terminological preferences. Very often, both approvers and disapprovers of Confucianism as a religion are crisscrossing the terminological water whenever it is to their advantage. While the application of either *rujia* or *ruxue* is relatively neutral in suggesting one’s position, the flexible and expedient use of *rujiao* is just the opposite. Due to the multiple significations of *rujiao*, it is not surprising that all sides in the debate can find enough room in applying this term to uphold their specific positions. As has been shown above, the supporters of Confucianism as a religion often try to justify their position by exploiting the semantic suggestiveness of the word *rujiao*. In contrast, the opponents either question the legitimacy of *rujiao* and use it with quotation marks, or simply interpret it in a sarcastic way.

⁹⁸ Again for *rujiao*, we have such titles: “Ten Reasons for ‘*Rujiao* as Religion’,” “State-Religion Alliance and Conflict: Take the Former Han *Rujiao* under Scrutiny,” “Marxist View of Religion and the Problem of *Rujiao*,” “*Rujiao* Is Certainly a Religion: Comparison between Christians and Confucians”, and etc.

⁹⁹ This tendency is shown in such titles: “How to Understand the Religiosity of *Ruxue*,” “Humanistic Religion and Religious Humanism: Scrutinize the Nature of *Ruxue* in light of early Chinese Religion and Humanistic Tradition,” “*Rujia* Does not Believe in God and Deities”, “Is *Ruxue* a Religion,” “The Impact of *Rujia* Thoughts on Chinese Religion,” “Contemporary New Confucianists’ Reflection on the Problem of *Ruxue* Religiosity,” “Doctrines on *Jiao* in the Philosophy of *Rujia*,” “Doctrines on ‘Fate’ in the Philosophy of *Rujia*,” and so on.

Terminological approach is often intriguing and yet treacherous and confusing at the same time. In any case, tendency does not guarantee necessity. A preference of the term *rujiao* does not necessarily suggest Confucianism being taken as a religion, though it sometimes does. Likewise, choosing *rujia* or *ruxue* would not necessarily result in the denial of Confucian religiosity. To put it simply, *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* are just some conceptually heuristic tools which are employed to help locate and identify the concerned epistemological subjects. If they are indicative of anything at all, they are indicative of certain perspectives and paradigms that are used in the theoretical construction of Confucianism. However, this is not to say that terminology plays no significant role in the debate on Confucian religiosity. On the contrary, terminological confusion is the primary cause that makes the question complicated, twisted, and distorted in the first place. Due to this reason, the debate on Confucian religiosity is very often caught up in the treacherous water of paronomasia, and any constructive discussion is kept at bay. Therefore, resolving terminological confusion is the first step towards a constructive and meaningful interpretation of the controversy on Confucian religiosity. It is in this sense that a transcendence of terminological limitation seems urgently necessary.

Transcendence of Terminological Limitation

The fact that there is no holistic and panoramic designation of Confucianism in the Chinese vocabulary, together with the conceptual ramifications of the term “religion”, poses a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to any attempt to define Confucianism in the category of religion. The question “Is Confucianism a religion?” simply cannot be conducted in the Chinese textuality without serious ambiguities and controversies. To ask

such a question in the Chinese semiotic system, if we can still count it as the same one at all, directs attention to aspects not necessarily converging with those of the Western consideration. The problem becomes even more poignant when considering the question's three versions in the Chinese context, executed by *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* respectively. Largely overlapping and yet fiercely competing, these terms point to varied subtleties and complexities of the religiosity of Confucianism. The disparity in how the question on Confucian religiosity is approached is essentially attributable to the different significations of these terms. In any case, whether the three versions of the question target the concerned issue with equal sensitivity remains questionable. This uncertainty ultimately challenges the very validity of the question itself.

It is commonly held that Confucianism as a historical tradition has assumed multiple facets and features that have stretched far beyond the definition of conceptions and constructions. In other words, it is a seamless entity that has penetrated and characterized every corner and every dimension of the traditional Chinese society.¹⁰⁰ Any effort to mark out a clear-cut borderline of Confucianism from non-Confucianism is doomed to be illusionary. It is thus crucial that *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* are taken as expedient constructs instead of faithful representations of the Confucian tradition. They are fundamental in the establishment of the Confucian scholarship, especially the discussion on Confucian religiosity. Without the heuristic function of these terms, the Confucian scholarship would be impossible in the first place. However, unlike the holistic and panoramic vision of "Confucianism" which sanctions a bird-eye-view approach in the Western textuality,

¹⁰⁰ For instance, Yu Yingshi argues that Confucianism was not just a philosophy or religion, but rather a comprehensive system that governed every corner and dimension of the traditional Chinese society. See Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun* (On Modern Confucianism) (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), p.230.

the semantic complexities of *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* have grounded the question in a way only accountable to the Chinese semiotic system.

The etymological investigation of *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* has showed that these terms, like many other terms in the Chinese language, are very ambiguous and loosely defined. They are usually used without necessary examination and prescription. To a large extent, these terms can only be counted as folk categories, categories that are without epistemological articulation and conceptual elaboration, and have to be tamed to participate in theoretical constructions. While *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* may still cause ambiguity and confusion even if they are tamable, it is impossible to deny their position in the signifying process of the Chinese language, simply because there are no other terms that can replace them. In fact, many scholars specialized in Confucianism have developed some understanding of Confucianism long before they become Confucian scholars. And it is precisely through folk categories such as *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* that these scholars develop their initial understanding of Confucianism.

In the contemporary scholarship of Confucianism, the terms *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* have become increasingly indispensable in the debate on Confucian religiosity. Because of their multiple implications, they can in a general sense refer to the Confucian tradition, and in an extended sense designate Chinese tradition and culture. Given the diversified and multi-faceted manifestations of Confucianism, each of the terms can be justified in representing the Confucian tradition in one way or another. But unlike the metonymic quality of “Confucianism,” which commands a holistic and panoramic vision, *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* conjure relatively selective and filtered perceptions of the Confucian tradition. Moreover, due to their varied implications and connotations, there does exist a

difference between their capability to cater to the sensitivity of signifying Confucian religiosity. Therefore, to choose which term to designate Confucianism with regard to its religiosity, one has to take this sensitivity into account. This is not just something to do with terminological convenience, but is also significant in dismantling the linguistic complexity that has haunted the Confucianism scholarship for a long time.

Two factors have significantly determined *rujiao*'s advantage in signifying the religiosity of Confucianism: its close association with the terms of *fojiao* and *daojiao*, collectively referred to as *sanjiao*; and its retrospective construction triggered by the Western concept of religion. Practically, it is *rujiao* instead of *rujia* and *ruxue* that is more capable of encompassing the religious aspect of Confucianism in a heuristic sense. Unlike *rujia* and *ruxue* which are inclined to direct attention to the intellectual dimension of Confucianism, *rujiao* is more likely to bring the "little" side of the tradition into perception. Judging from this perspective, *rujiao* is actually not very different from "Confucianism" in terms of conjuring an imagery of "the civil religion, the official cult, and the intellectual tradition"¹⁰¹ of the traditional Chinese society. Therefore, any effort to dismantle the linguistic ambiguity in the controversy on Confucian religiosity has to take into account both terminological legitimacy and semiotic expediency. The latest debate has showed that the term *rujiao* enjoys far higher frequency than either *ruxue* or *rujia*.¹⁰² This tendency demonstrates a conventional preference of *rujiao* when it comes to the discussion of Confucian religiosity. It is probably in this sense that a prescriptive and circumspect application of *rujiao* is significant to resolving the linguistic complexity

¹⁰¹ Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, p.4.

¹⁰² See II-4 of this chapter, "Distribution of *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*."

in the controversy.¹⁰³ The prospect of transcending terminological confusion, if achievable at all, has thus to be sought in the compromise of pragmatism, if without compromising epistemological principles.

Ideological Complication: Cultural and Political Stakes

Meaning can be created not only by how a question is answered, but also by how a question is asked. This is especially true when it comes to discussing the religiosity of Confucianism. It is thus significant to investigate the conditions under which the question is raised. The linguistic ramifications of the question on Confucian religiosity have suggested that it encompasses different values and implications in different textualities. In other words, the question addresses the Western and the Chinese audiences with different priorities and subtleties. This difference is not as much derived from linguistic ambiguities and epistemological problems as from the relevance of the question to the cultural and political textures of the Chinese society. Dismantling the complexity of the question in the Chinese textuality, therefore, is not only important to understanding the Confucian religiosity per se, but also crucial in deciphering the Chinese way of interpreting tradition and modernity.

At this point, Saussure's theory on the syntagm¹⁰⁴ may shed light on understanding the significance and complication of the question on Confucian religiosity. According to

¹⁰³ He Guanghu has suggested that *rujiao* be not taken as the totality of the Confucian tradition. Instead, he prescribes *rujiao* as referring to the native Chinese religion which originated during the Shang and Zhou periods (~1600-249 BCE). It consists of the central belief in the heavenly God, the congregations, and the theology embodied in the Confucian learning (*ruxue*). See He Guanghu, "Zhongguo Wenhua de Gen yu Hua: Tan Ruxue de Fanben yu Kaixin."

¹⁰⁴ Saussure calls the combination of words bound in linear nature a *syntagm*, since he believes that words in discourse acquire relations based on the linear nature of language. The notion of syntagm applies not only to words but also to groups of words, to complex units of all lengths and types. Sentence is the ideal type of syntagm. See *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, pp.974, 975.

Saussure, words in discourse are involved in both syntagmatic and associative relations, with the former created inside discourse based on the linear nature of language, and the latter acquired outside discourse by appealing to mental association.¹⁰⁵ Whereas a syntagm immediately suggests an order of succession and a fixed number of elements, the associative relations of terms are obtained neither in fixed numbers nor in a definite order.¹⁰⁶ Through its grasp of the nature of the relations that bind the terms together, the mind creates as many associative series as there are diverse relations. A word can evoke everything that can be associated with it in one way or another.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, a term in discourse acquires value from its environment, from both the syntagmatic and the associative relations. In other words, the value of a term in discourse depends on what is outside and around it.¹⁰⁸

To investigate the implication of a discourse, it is necessary to consider not only the relation that ties together the different parts of syntagm, but also the relation that links the whole to its parts.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the significance of a discourse has to be interpreted in light of the relations that constitute the environment of the terms. Specifically, the discourse of “Is Confucianism a religion?” should be approached with regard to both the syntagmatic and the associative relations of the terms that compose the question.

Whereas the former refers to the intra-discourse relation between “Confucianism” and “religion”, the latter implies the respective associations of the two terms that are formed outside the discourse. The very fact that “Confucianism” and “religion” are juxtaposed in such a syntagm has already indicated that the modern conception of Confucianism is

¹⁰⁵ *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, pp.974-976.

¹⁰⁶ *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, p.976.

¹⁰⁷ *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, p.976.

¹⁰⁸ *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, p.970.

¹⁰⁹ *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, p.975.

inextricably entangled with the perception of religion. This is so in both the Western and the Chinese languages, because the syntagm of the question assumes the same linear nature. It is precisely in this sense that the construction of the question per se, in both the Western and the Chinese textualities, is already suggestive and illuminating regardless of its answer.

Nevertheless, as Li You-Zheng has rightly pointed out, “Western sinological studies of Chinese subjects within Western academies and studies of the same Chinese subjects within Chinese academies are generally divergent in focus, aim, purpose, and perspective.”¹¹⁰ This is especially true when it comes to defining Confucianism in the Western category of religion. As a matter of fact, the question on Confucian religiosity in the Chinese textuality is very different from its Western counterpart in terms of values and implications, primarily due to the different associative relations of *rujiao*, or, for that matter, *rujia*, *ruxue*, and *zongjiao* in comparison to those of “Confucianism” and “religion”. The terms of *rujiao*, *rujia*, *ruxue* and *zongjiao* are involved in associative relations that have significantly contributed to the ambiguity and complexity of the question in the Chinese textuality. On the one hand, the mutual entanglement of *rujiao*, *rujia*, *ruxue* in their competition to signify Confucianism is likely to induce a centrifugal tendency towards anything to do with the conception of religion. Even if *rujiao* is subscribed to as the more legitimate choice to construe the question on Confucian religiosity, the problem of signification won’t be automatically resolved. This is not just because of the ambiguity embodied in the connotations of *rujiao*, but also due to its involvement in associative relations other than *rujia* and *ruxue*. To say the least, it is

¹¹⁰ Li You-Zheng, “Epistemological and Methodological Problems in Studies of Traditional Chinese Ethical Scholarship,” in *New Literary History* (John Hopkins), 1995, vol.26, p.528.

closely affiliated with the terms of *fojiao* (Buddhism) and *daojiao* (Taoism), collectively portrayed as *sanjiao*. However, this layer of association is likely to complicate the implication of *rujiao* than otherwise in terms of signifying the Confucian religiosity. In fact, *sanjiao* as such is usually referred to as the doctrines of the three traditions in a historical sense, not necessarily conjuring a sense of religiosity in the Chinese semiotic system. Therefore, if *rujiao* has not yet been justified as a default choice in designating Confucianism with regard to its religiosity, its associative relations with *rujia* and *ruxue*, and with *fojiao* and *daojiao* in extension, simply dilute its vague legitimacy even more.

On the other hand, the concept of *zongjiao* has long been perceived as in sharp opposition to the notions of democracy and science in the Chinese textuality, a legacy solely attributable to the triumph of the May Fourth Movement.¹¹¹ Inspired by the Enlightenment of the West and convinced by the progress of science and technology, the May Fourth generation advocated cultural reforms embracing the elimination of all religions, which were regarded as superstition and consequently inimical to the modernization of the state.¹¹² It was thus commonly believed that religion was destined to disappear from human society since its falsity had long been proved by modern science.¹¹³ This radical attitude towards religion has been inculcated in the mentality of generations of Chinese intellectuals, and Chinese studies of religion have generally assumed a critical position. Whereas in Chinese academies *zongjiao* is still bound with ethics, philosophy and other categories, in the popular level it is often associated with the

¹¹¹ The May Fourth Movement took place in 1919 as the culmination of the New Culture Movement. It mainly protested the Western aggression and urged Chinese enlightenment. “Mr. D” (democracy) and “Mr. S” (Science) are the two famous slogans of the movement.

¹¹² Douglas Lancashire, tr., *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), p.6.

¹¹³ Lancashire, *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith*, p.6.

notions of feudalism, superstition, and backwardness, etc., simply due to the prevalence of the May Fourth sentiment.

In comparison to *rujiao* and *zongjiao*, the terms of “Confucianism” and “religion” are imbued with different implications in the Western textuality. Unlike the diffused visions of *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue* in signifying the Confucian religiosity, the vision of “Confucianism” is rather concentrated and condensed. The close association between “Confucianism” and terms such as “Taoism,” “Buddhism,” and “Christianity” induces a centripetal tendency towards a sense of religiosity. Although its humanistic dimension is usually emphasized, the comparative studies of Confucianism with other religions indicate the legitimacy of employing religious paradigms to conceptualize the Confucian tradition. This is not something automatically approvable in Chinese academies, since there is always a delicate distance gauged between religion and Confucianism. The contrast between the reception of *zongjiao* and “religion” in their respective textualities is even more dramatic. Unlike *zongjiao*, which is often treated with indifference and suspicion in China, the concept of religion strikes far less critical resonance in the West, at both academic and popular levels. Instead of being associated with the notions of feudalism, superstition, and backwardness, religion is often perceived in light of spirituality, morality, and passion in the Western textuality. Hence, along with its descriptive meanings, the term “religion” usually carries a commendatory implication of “devotion, fidelity or faithfulness, conscientiousness, pious, affection or attachment.”¹¹⁴

The associative relations of the terms of *rujiao* and *zongjiao* reflect the political, cultural, and social circumstances under which the question on Confucian religiosity is raised in the Chinese context. These relations all participate in the composition of the

¹¹⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition, vol.13, p.569.

values and implications of the discourse on Confucian religiosity. Hence, the significance of the question can only be acknowledged when these circumstances, attributable to the tragic nature of the modern history of China, are fully taken into account. This tragic nature is manifested in one of the sharpest ironies of China: on the one hand it claims a civilization five thousand years old, whereas on the other it has experienced an extreme disintegration of tradition since the end of the 19th century. Therefore, any discussion on Confucian religiosity has to take into account this historical and cultural complexity. It is thus necessary to keep in mind the consequence of employing religious paradigms to interpret and schematize Chinese tradition and culture. Given this context, it is barely surprising when Yu Dunkang maintains that the question on Confucian religiosity is epistemologically a pseudo-question, a pure polemic with ideological stakes.¹¹⁵ Zhang Dainian, a contemporary Chinese philosopher, has expressed a similar view: “There is no need to discuss the question; no consensus will be achieved in any discussion.”¹¹⁶

Although the controversy on Confucian religiosity did not gain significant visibility until the beginning of the 20th century, its origin can be traced back to Matteo Ricci and to the Rites Controversy during the late Ming and early Qing periods.¹¹⁷ Through the tremendous missionary engagement of the Jesuits, the channel between the Chinese society and the Christian culture was substantially established during this era. It was in this specific background that the debate on Confucian religiosity came to the surface. Since the ultimate purpose of the Jesuits was to convert Chinese to Christianity, the “religion or not” question on Confucianism became the first and foremost challenge they

¹¹⁵ Yu Dunkang is a research fellow from the Institute for Research on World Religions. See the “Recordings of ‘Confucianism and Religion Symposium’” (1), in www.confucius2000.com.

¹¹⁶ Cui Zheng, “Rujiao Wenti zai Fansi” (Rethinking the Question on Confucian Religion), in <http://www.confuchina.com>.

¹¹⁷ On the Chinese Rites Controversy, see Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*.

had to face. In other words, the debate itself as an integral part of the Jesuit missionary engagement fully unfolded in terms of the missionary agendas and establishments. Hence, the question on whether Confucianism is a religion at this point was essentially a “Western” question rather than a “Chinese” question.¹¹⁸

More importantly, the missionary purpose of the Jesuits had determined that their endeavor to interpret Confucianism in terms of religion was instrumentally motivated. That is, the problem of whether or not to define Confucianism as a religion is attributable to the Jesuit mission of disseminating Christianity. Therefore, the epistemological consideration of Confucian religiosity, if there was any at all, had to give way to the political and cultural priorities of the Jesuits. The humanistic and rational orientation of the Jesuits had certainly played a role in the fact that they interpreted Confucianism as a secular, non-religious tradition.¹¹⁹ However, this orientation had to comply with the instrumental and practical pursuits of their missionary engagement. This is probably why Confucianism was treated with sympathy on the one hand, and regarded as a preparation for Christianity on the other. The dual sentiment of the Jesuits was especially discernible in many of Matteo Ricci’s writings. In one of his books, Ricci stated that the Confucian precepts were “quite in conformity with the light of conscience and with Christian truth,” but yet there was “no mention of heaven or of hell.”¹²⁰ This seeming contradiction of Confucianism, thus Ricci believed, was to justify itself as the very preparation for Christianity. The comparative studies between the two traditions conducted by the Jesuits

¹¹⁸ Wu Wenzhang, “Lun Rujia yu Rujiao: Cong Rujia Shifou wei Zongjiao Tanqi,” in www.confucius2000.com.

¹¹⁹ Han Xing, “Rujiao Shijiaofeijiao Zhizheng de Lishi Qiyuan ji Qishi” (“The Historical Origin and Revelation of the Controversy on Whether Confucianism Is a Religion”), in www.confucius2000.com.

¹²⁰ *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, tr. from Trigault’s Latin by L.J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), pp.94, 97.

were thus meant to make Christianity acceptable to the Chinese people. “I make every effort to turn our way the ideas of the leader of the sect of the literati, Confucius, by interpreting in our favor things which he left ambiguous in his writings. In this way our Fathers gain great favor with the literati who do not adore the idols.”¹²¹

Like the case of the early Jesuits, the missionary motivation was also behind some of the early Sinologists. For them the question on Confucian religiosity was far less an epistemological consideration than a political and cultural project. James Legge, who gained fame by translating the Confucian classics into English, revealed his missionary zeal in his book on Chinese religion. “The reason I discuss Confucianism and Taoism is to demonstrate that we can spread Christianity in the great China. True Christianity is the highest form of humanity. The obstacles that used to exist in China and other nations are no longer there. I myself deeply believe that they (Chinese) will accept Christianity. That way they will decide their own fate, and thus establish themselves in accordance with social norms.”¹²² Due to this reason, James Legge dedicated his whole life to studying Confucianism and Taoism, in the hope of persuading the followers of those two teachings to convert to Christianity. For Legge, Confucianism was none other than the very preparation and hotbed of Christianity. Thus, “Confucianism, which for the Jesuits had seemed a wonderful preparation for the Gospel, was, even for Legge the great interpreter of it, an evil which had to be swept away.”¹²³

By interpreting Confucianism in the paradigms of Christianity, the Jesuits had significantly shaped the way Chinese cultural discussions would be carried out in the

¹²¹ In *Fonti Ricciane*, ed. P.M. D’Elia, (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1942-9), N709, II, 296; quoted in Rule, *K’ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.1.

¹²² James Legge, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880), pp.242, 308-309.

¹²³ Raymond Dawson, ed., *The Legacy of China* (Oxford University Press, 1964), p.25.

following centuries. The debate on Confucian religiosity, constructed in this very textuality, has constantly carried political and cultural weight to the engagement of its epistemological formality. In the wake of Sino-West encounter at the turn of the 20th century, the controversy on Confucian religiosity assumed two sharply opposing ramifications. By adopting a strongly anti-religious position, the May Fourth intellectuals whole-heartedly welcomed science and democracy, and thus advocated a substitution of religion with scientific rationality or aesthetic education.¹²⁴ While declining to regard Confucianism as a form of religion, they truly believed that it belonged to the past and should be swept into the reservoir of academics. In contrast to this pro-science sentiment, some conservative intellectuals, such as Kang Youwei and Chen Huanzhang, tried in vain to promote Confucianism to the status of state religion, hoping to counter the Western dominance and to rectify the iconoclasm of the May Fourth generation.

The ramifications of the controversy in the May Fourth period continue to cast a spell on the contemporary debate of the question that has resurged after the Cultural Revolution. In the effort to revise the anti-tradition attitude of the May Fourth generation, many philosophically oriented scholars are trying to revitalize Chinese culture by retrieving the positive spirit of Confucianism. They generally hold a negative attitude towards religion, and to deny Confucianism an admission into the category of religion reflects their rationalist orientation. To a large degree, this philosophical approach to Confucianism is still imbued with the May Fourth sentiment, though in a much less radical tone. On the other hand, Confucian scholars who adopt a religious approach to

¹²⁴ For example, Cai Yuanpei suggested replacing religion with aesthetic education, Hu Shi advocated substituting religion with social immortality. Some non-May Fourth intellectuals also provided their plans to substitute religion. For instance, Liang Shumin, the New Confucian scholar, proposed replacing religion with ethics, whereas philosopher Feng Youlan was in favor of using philosophy to substitute religion.

Confucianism have assumed mixed attitudes towards the tradition, depending on their attitudes towards religion in general.¹²⁵ The anti-religion camp, equipped with the Marxist ideology and a steadfast faith in scientism, tends to repudiate Confucianism as a whole by labeling it as “a religion.” This approach only recognizes the *rujiao* version of Confucianism (thus in denial or neglect of the *rujia* and *ruxue* versions), and will likely lead to a complete dismissal of tradition and culture.¹²⁶ In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have adopted a positive attitude towards religion and are sympathetic in approaching the religiosity of Confucianism. They either address the social and political significance of constructing Confucianism as “a religion,”¹²⁷ or endeavor to reinterpret and revitalize Confucian religiosity in accordance with the spirit of modernity.¹²⁸

Regardless of its historical transformations, for the Chinese, the controversy on Confucian religiosity has always to do with the question on national survival. “The controversy on ‘whether Confucianism is a religion,’ is none other than a manifestation of the sanctifying and the secularizing approaches to Confucianism: the former trying to enhance social solidarity by restructuring Confucianism as a religious system, whereas the latter attempting to portray Confucius and Mencius as social reformers with rational and ethical orientations. But the ultimate concern of both approaches, is neither Confucianism nor religion, but rather the nation.”¹²⁹ In contrast to the anxiety of national survival embedded in the Chinese textuality, the Western debate on Confucian religiosity

¹²⁵ Han Xing, “Rujiao Shijiaofeijiao Zhizheng de Lishi Qiyuan ji Qishi,” in www.confucius2000.com.

¹²⁶ Many scholars from the so-called “Confucian Religion School,” noticeably Ren Jiyu and Li Shen, are representative of this Marxist approach.

¹²⁷ Jiang Qing and Kang Xiaoguang are the two representatives of this fundamentalist approach.

¹²⁸ Zheng Jiadong and Chen Ming hold a very positive attitude toward reinterpreting Confucian religiosity in light of modernity, though their approaches are not exactly the same.

¹²⁹ Ye Renchang, *Jindai Zhongguo de Fandui Jidujiao Yundong* (The Anti-Christianity Movement in Modern China) (Taipei: Yage Chubanshe, 1988), p.94.

has washed off the smell of blood and gunpowder since the end of the Christian missionary expansion. For the West, it is now an armchair question with the comfort of aloofness and intellectual challenge, whereas for China it is rather a cultural, socio-political, and epistemological question that needs to be engaged not only in classrooms and conferences, but also in the street. The syntagmatic relation between *rujiao* and *zongjiao* in the discourse on Confucian religiosity, therefore, is destined to bring up their associative relations that carry socio-political and cultural significance to the Chinese textuality. Probably only in this sense can we say that it is indeed a rhetorical question constructed in the format of epistemology.

CHAPTER II

HISTORY OF THE CONTROVERSY ON CONFUCIAN RELIGIOSITY

The controversy on Confucian religiosity has left a significant mark on the modern intellectual history of China, a fact that may not be readily recognizable for many scholars. The origin of the controversy can be traced back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries,¹³⁰ a period when Matteo Ricci and his cohort managed to make initial contacts with the Chinese court. It is through the Jesuit engagement of Chinese culture that the interaction between Christianity and Confucianism was inaugurated. In some sense, both traditions had rediscovered themselves through the perspective of the other. On the one hand, Christianity found a peculiar way to present its message to the Chinese through the Confucian language; on the other, Confucianism was approached in the paradigms of Christianity for the first time. However, the Jesuit engagement of Chinese culture soon triggered a division in the Christian mission, a division that was later intensified in the Rites Controversy,¹³¹ and which eventually resulted in the termination of the mission in China all together. Nevertheless, the intellectual legacy of the Jesuits, especially that of Matteo Ricci, had set a fundamental tone for the debate on Confucian religiosity for centuries to come. In the later development of the controversy, both religious and non-religious approaches to Confucianism, regardless of their historical backgrounds and

¹³⁰ Some scholars attribute the formal beginning of the controversy to the early 20th century. See Li Shen, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (History of the Confucian Religion in China), vol.2, p.1066.

¹³¹ The Rites Controversy was both on the legitimacy of certain terms and on the compatibility of Confucian rites with Catholicism. Originally a fight between the Jesuits and other societies of Catholicism, it escalated into a diplomatic and cultural war between the Vatican and China in the early 18th century. See Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, pp.124-149.

socio-political agendas, have repeatedly appealed to Matteo Ricci for textual and methodological inspiration.¹³²

The second surge of the controversy on Confucian religiosity, however, cannot be taken as a natural continuation of the first, though both of them were deeply entangled in cultural and political persuasions. The controversy triggered by the Jesuits can be largely attributed to the Christian mission's own struggles in approaching Chinese tradition and culture; in other words, it was in fact a "Jesuit" question. By contrast, the controversy in the early 20th century was a native response to the extreme disruption of Chinese society due to Western domination; it was essentially a "Chinese" question. It carried such huge cultural and political stakes during a time of national crisis that all the political camps at that time had taken advantage of Confucianism, either positively or negatively, for their expedient rhetoric.¹³³ While Kang Youwei and his followers tried all their means to promote Confucianism as a state religion to counter Western power, the May Fourth intellectuals simply opposed any attempt to dress it up as a religion. Regardless of their disparate positions, however, both camps were determined to pursue social and political agendas in precedence over any academic discussion on Confucian religiosity. The politicization of the controversy signified their particular and instinctive response to the national crisis. It appears that any debate on Confucianism without appealing to social and political utility in such a context would be detrimentally luxurious and anachronistic.

¹³² Han Xing, "Rujiao Shijiao Feijiao Zhizheng de Lishi Qiyuan ji Qishi" (The Historical Origin and Revelation of the Controversy on Confucianism as Religion or Non-religion), in www.confucius2000.com.

¹³³ The expedient employment of Confucianism was most vividly illustrated in the slogans of the two camps: *baoguo*, *baozhong*, *baojiao* ("to preserve the country, the race, the [Confucian] teaching"), and *dadao kongjiadian* ("to smash the Confucian shop"), respectively.

The third surge of the controversy in the late 1970s was not as politically charged as the first two, despite the fact that China had just survived the catastrophe of Cultural Revolution and was searching for its new direction. In 1978, Ren Jiyu, the then director of the Institute for Research on World Religions, shocked Chinese academics nationwide by presenting Confucianism as “a religion.”¹³⁴ Due to Marxist ideology’s antagonistic attitude towards religion, to define Confucianism as a religion was tantamount to denying its eligibility of any contribution to the socialist construction. Ren’s proposition was absolutely stunning if not revolutionary, since the Communist Party had in principle endorsed a dialectical approach of Confucianism. Despite its radical tone, however, Ren’s perspective should be credited for its epistemological integrity. This is the first time in Chinese intellectual history that Confucianism was approached in terms of religion without direct political engagement. To be sure, the taste of ideological persuasion was still there, but a sense of academic sincerity had certainly come to the fore. Following Ren’s initiative, there have since emerged stormy debates on the legitimacy, relevance, and orientation in bringing the terms of religion to the interpretation of Confucianism. Once a predominantly social and political rhetoric, the question on Confucian religiosity has finally assumed epistemological significance. This paradigm shift, though still largely compromised by social and political complications from time to time, opens up a possibility of bringing a hermeneutic reading of Confucian religiosity to the terms of understanding Chinese tradition and modernity.

In addition to the above-mentioned episodes of the controversy, there also exists a distinctively metaphysical approach to Confucian religiosity, i.e., New Confucianism. In

¹³⁴ Xing Dongtian, “1978-2000 nian de Rujiao Yanjiu: Xueshu Huigu yu Sikao” (The Research on Confucianism (*rujiao*) from 1978 to 2000: An Academic Review), *Xueshujie* (The Academia), no. 2, 2003.

comparison to the historical consciousness of the three controversies, the approach of New Confucianism is not contained in historically specific contexts. As a self-renovation effort of Confucianism in the wake of the May Fourth Movement,¹³⁵ this scholarship for the most part of 20th century was the only choice to hold a constructive position on Chinese tradition and culture. When the Communist Party took power in 1949, most scholars of this lineage fled the Chinese mainland and upheld their initiative in exile. Their intellectual legacy did not come back into China until the 1990s. In general, the scholars of New Confucianism have not specifically participated in the historical controversies, but have rather engaged the interpretation of Confucian religiosity from philosophical and cultural perspectives.

Matteo Ricci and the Rites Controversy

As far as the history of the Jesuits is concerned, their approach to the Confucian tradition was not just an intellectual exercise, but also an active engagement in Chinese life. Upon their entry into China, the Jesuits swiftly discovered the dominant role of the Confucian *literati* in the Chinese society, and allied themselves with the Confucians against the Buddhists.¹³⁶ In order to secure an audience for their message, the Jesuits realized that they had to come to the terms acceptable to the Chinese. It is thus no surprise that they ended up with a very pragmatic and flexible strategy for their mission, in which adapting to the social norms of the Confucians became a top priority. As a way of engaging in Chinese life, the Jesuits adopted the language, dress, teaching, and even

¹³⁵ Han Xing, “Wusi Xinwenhua Yundong Changdao zhe de Kongjiao Feijiao Shuo” (The Theory of Confucianism as Non-religion of the Initiators of the May Fourth New Culture Movement), in www.confucius2000.com.

¹³⁶ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.28.

title of the Confucians.¹³⁷ In the intellectual dimension, they emphasized the compatibility between Christianity and Confucianism, and presented the Christian message in terms of Confucian language.

To a large extent, the Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism in its early periods is illustrated in the personal history of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610).¹³⁸ Therefore, our understanding of the Jesuit approach to Confucianism is greatly conditioned by the available materials that Matteo Ricci left behind. Since it is unrealistic to have an exhaustive analysis of Ricci's materials in the current research,¹³⁹ this section will rather focus on his most representative work in expressing his basic stance on Confucianism, namely, the *Journals*.¹⁴⁰ Unlike the catechism of *Tianzhu Shiyi*,¹⁴¹ which is committed to a direct engagement of evangelical rhetoric, the *Journals* presents Ricci's relatively mature and cautious interpretation of Confucianism. Relying on textual evidence primarily from the *Journals*, however, the current research is neither intended nor in a qualified position to launch a comprehensive investigation of Ricci's ever evolving view on Confucianism. Instead, it will engage in a rather a-historical exploration of Ricci's presentation of Confucianism with regard to the cultural and political commitments of the Jesuits. In particular, an effort will be made to inspect how Ricci's approach to the question on Confucian religiosity would have shaped the trajectory of the controversy in the following centuries.

¹³⁷ Liu Yezheng, *Zhongguo Wenhua Shi* (The Cultural History of China) (Shanghai: Dongfang Chuban Zhongxin, 1988), vol.2, p.661.

¹³⁸ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, pp.1-2.

¹³⁹ This is in part due to my limited command of Matteo Ricci's materials, and in part due to the limited scale of my current research on this issue in comparison to the overall project.

¹⁴⁰ *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, tr. from Trigault's Latin by L.J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953).

¹⁴¹ *Tianzhu Shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), 1603; rp. Taipei, 1967. As a catechism, *Tianzhu Shiyi* is primarily aimed at converting the Chinese to Christianity, hence its form of a dialogue between a Western scholar and a Chinese scholar.

Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism

Needless to say, Ricci's interpretation of Confucianism, regardless of his humanist and rationalist education in the early years,¹⁴² had to pivot upon and favor the overall strategy of the Jesuit mission. For the Jesuits, how to interpret Confucianism in Christian paradigms was a matter of means, whereas spreading the Christian message had to be the ultimate goal. It is thus worth noting to what extent Ricci's view on Confucianism was aligned with the Jesuit mission, and correspondingly, how significant this alignment was to the Jesuit adoption of an "accommodation" strategy.¹⁴³ Ricci's position was carefully cultivated in many of his writings. It is of primary importance to notice his careful choice of terms such as "sect", "cult", and "law" to describe the native traditions of the Chinese in comparison to the "religion" of Christianity.¹⁴⁴ For Ricci, there was really no "religion" in China worth speaking of, even though "the sect of the literati" had come very close to the light of Christian truth. Given the Christ-centric connotations of the term "religion" during Ricci's time, his orthodox judgment of Chinese traditions did not come as a surprise, especially when the Jesuit persuasion was at stake. After all, Ricci's understanding of religion as a singularity was in perfect accordance with the intellectual parameters of his time.

The theme of the complementarity of Confucianism and Christianity is articulated throughout the *Journals*, though often implicitly. According to Ricci, the Chinese sects, religious as they might be, fell short of conscience and truth that could only be found in

¹⁴² Han Xing, "Rujiao Shijiao Feijiao Zhizheng de Lishi Qiyuan ji Qishi"; Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.12.

¹⁴³ Paul A Rule, "Jesuit and Confucian: Chinese Religion in the Journals of Matteo Ricci SJ 1583-1610", *Journal of Religious History*, 1968, vol.2, pp.104-125.

¹⁴⁴ See Gallagher, 1953, Book One Chapter 10.

Christianity.¹⁴⁵ As a consequence, the Chinese society had left out a perfect niche for Christianity to fill in. The question for the Jesuits, therefore, was whether they could make good use of the existing native practices, and if so, to what extent. It is in this sense that Confucianism, as “native” (as opposed to an alien Buddhism) and “proper” to China, and “far more celebrated than the others,” stood out as an ideal candidate for the Jesuits.¹⁴⁶ In several places of the *Journals*, Ricci repeatedly emphasizes that the ancient Confucianism was an acceptable and pure form of “natural law” and that only recently had it been corrupted by contact with Buddhism, or degenerated into the deepest depths of utter atheism.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, Confucianism as far from being contrary to Christian principles, “could derive great benefit from Christianity and might be developed and perfected by it.”¹⁴⁸

In Book I Chapter 10 of the *Journals*, Matteo Ricci’s persuasion on a return to the purity of primitive Confucianism is laid out in a rather systematic fashion. The chapter begins its investigation on the religious sects of China by remarking that the ancient Chinese were no more erroneous than the ancient Europeans.¹⁴⁹ According to Ricci, the ancient Chinese considered heaven and earth to be animated things and worshipped their common soul as a supreme deity, whom they called the King of Heaven; there were also some subsidiary spirits that were worshipped as less powerful deities. The real challenge for Ricci, however, was how to bring his conception of primitive Confucianism as a

¹⁴⁵ This theme is consistently suggested in the *Journals*, especially in Book One Chapter 10.

¹⁴⁶ Gallagher, 1953, p.94.

¹⁴⁷ Gallagher, 1953, pp.93-95.

¹⁴⁸ Gallagher, 1953, p.98.

¹⁴⁹ Gallagher, 1953, p.93.

naturalistic theism to do away with the Neo-Confucianism¹⁵⁰ of his day, something not expediently simple and amenable to Christian interpretation. His solution to this predicament, not unscrupulously, is to blame it on the contamination of Buddhism, “the sect of idols.”

The doctrine most commonly held among the Literati at present seems to me to have been taken from the sect of idols, as promulgated about five centuries ago. This doctrine asserts that the entire universe is composed of a common substance. ...From this unity of substance they reason to the love that should unite the individual constituents and also that man can become like unto God because he is created one with God. This philosophy we endeavor to refute, not only from reason but also from the testimony of their own ancient philosophers to whom they are indebted for all the philosophy they have.¹⁵¹

Given the accommodation strategy of the Jesuits, Ricci’s dismissal of Neo-Confucianism made as much sense to him as his alliance with the ancient sect of the Literati. In fact, both gestures were integral components of his tactical consideration. It is safe to say that Ricci’s careful calculation of the social and political reality of his day outweighed his intellectual engagement with Neo-Confucianism. By blaming Buddhism for the defiance of Neo-Confucianism, he was instantly rewarded with a leverage “to attack anti-Christian philosophical tendencies in Confucianism and to enlist Confucian support against the Buddhists.”¹⁵² Because the bitter antagonism between Confucianism and Buddhism had long been standing, Ricci’s taking advantage of this situation did not seem to be a problem for the Confucians. Quite the contrary, for many Confucians who

¹⁵⁰ By borrowing metaphysics from Buddhism, the development of the Neo-Confucianism from the Song Dynasty on was a direct response to the Buddhist challenge. See Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), tr. by Derk Bodde.

¹⁵¹ Gallagher, 1953, p.95.

¹⁵² Rule, “Jesuit and Confucian,” p.116.

had some understanding of Christianity, the Christian law “does away with idols and completes the law of the literati.”¹⁵³

Nevertheless, Ricci’s appeal to the theistic roots of Confucianism in his attack on Buddhism, whether out of tactical consideration or out of conviction, did not preclude his personal fascination with the “moral philosophy” of Confucius. In many places of the *Journals*, Ricci seems to be far more intrigued than troubled by the rational orientation of Confucian teachings.¹⁵⁴ Confucius as the most renowned of all the “ancient philosophers”, Ricci believes, “spurred on his people to the pursuit of virtue not less by his own example than by his writings and conferences.”¹⁵⁵ Confucianism in Ricci’s understanding, therefore, is primarily an ethical system, a moral and a social philosophy. It is the social and political utility rather than religious significance of Confucian doctrines that Ricci essentially emphasizes:

The ultimate purpose and the general intention of this sect, the Literati, is public peace and order in the kingdom. They likewise look toward the economic security of the family and the virtuous training of the individual. The precepts they formulate are certainly directive to such ends and quite in conformity with the light of conscience and with Christian truth.¹⁵⁶

It seems that from the moment Matteo Ricci was exposed to Chinese traditions, his presentation of Confucianism was caught up in the tension between “a genuine intellectual rapport”¹⁵⁷ and a tactical concern. As long as the notion of compatibility between Christianity and Confucianism was not questioned, however, Ricci was able to keep a fragile balance between his Jesuit obligation and his intellectual taste. For Ricci,

¹⁵³ Gallagher, 1953, p.448; Gu Weimin, *Jidujiao yu Jindai Zhongguo Shehui* (Christianity and Modern Chinese Society) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1996), pp.77-78.

¹⁵⁴ Although Confucius might have accepted the concepts about God, associated with the terms of *tian* and *shangdi*, his teachings, as embedded in the *Analects*, remained strictly rational and this-worldly.

¹⁵⁵ Gallagher, 1953, p.30.

¹⁵⁶ Gallagher, 1953, p.97.

¹⁵⁷ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.28.

although “primitive ideas of religion become so obscure [in China] with the passing of time,” the Confucian books “are still extant and are filled with most salutary advice on training men to be virtuous,” and the ancient Chinese philosophers “seem to be quite the equals of our own most distinguished philosophers.”¹⁵⁸ The theistic traces of the sect of Literati and the rational philosophy of Confucius were thus juxtaposed, rather than reconciled, in Ricci’s accommodative approach to Confucianism. It is very likely, as Paul Rule claims, that Ricci was attracted to Confucianism in the first place not by its religious values, but by its non-religious nature, its ethical and social values.¹⁵⁹

Nowhere else than in his wrestling with the paradox of Confucian rites is Ricci’s predicament in balancing the Jesuit rhetoric and his intellectual taste more vividly illustrated. The ambiguity is even further complicated in the later editing and translating of his materials.¹⁶⁰ While the modification and simplification sanctioned by Trigault in the *Journals* showed an instinct of apologetics, Ricci’s struggle with the complexity of Confucian rites was more cautious and sensitive. He seems to be fully aware of the need to approach the Confucian rites with discrimination. In fact, this consciousness accorded him leverage to emphasize either “religious” or “secular” quality of the rites at his convenience.

Although the Literati, as they are called, do recognize one supreme deity, they erect no temples in his honor. No special places are assigned for his worship, consequently no priests or ministers are designated to direct that worship. We do not find any special rites to be observed by all, or precepts to be followed, nor any supreme authority to explain or promulgate laws or to punish violations of laws pertaining to a supreme being. Neither are there any public or private prayers or hymns to be said or sung in honor of a supreme deity. The duty of

¹⁵⁸ Gallagher, 1953, p.93.

¹⁵⁹ Rule, *K’ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.29.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Rule claims that there are significant differences between the text of the *Fonti Ricciane* and the *Journals* in the passages concerning the controversial question of Confucian rites. See Rule, “Jesuit and Confucian: Chinese Religion in the Journals of Matteo Ricci SJ 1583-1610”.

sacrifice and the rites of worship for this supreme being belong to the imperial majesty alone.¹⁶¹

Ricci's insistence on the theological foundation of Confucianism was not compromised by the discrepancy between the Confucian rites and the Christian rites. As long as the Literati recognized the supreme deity, the key element in Ricci's notion of religion, they were not too far astray from Christianity and were ultimately redeemable. The lack of temples, of priests or ministers, and of prayers or hymns, simply became trivial in light of this religious quality. Even the exclusive prerogative of the emperor to make sacrifice to the supreme deity, something not quite compliant with Christian rites, did not seem to be a problem for Ricci.

On the other hand, Ricci's approach to ancestral rites took a diametrically different path. By interpreting them as neither religious nor superstitious, Ricci appealed to their secular utility for vindication. For Ricci, the Literati "do not in any respect consider their ancestors to be gods, nor do they petition them for anything or hope for anything from them."¹⁶² Instead, ancestral rites were civil and social in nature, "instituted for the benefit of the living rather than for that of the dead."¹⁶³ In this way, the children and unlearned adults "might learn how to respect and to support their parents who were living, when they saw that parents departed were so highly honored by those who were educated and prominent."¹⁶⁴ As for the worship of Confucius, Ricci again saw no religious element involved. The Literati offered food to Confucius not as sacrifice but to "assert their thanks for the doctrines contained in his writings," because "by means of these doctrines they acquired their literary degrees, and the country acquired the excellent public civil

¹⁶¹ Gallagher, 1953, p.95.

¹⁶² Gallagher, 1953, p.96.

¹⁶³ Gallagher, 1953, p.96.

¹⁶⁴ Gallagher, 1953, p.96.

authority invested in the magistracy.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, in the worship of Confucius, as in any other ancestral rites, “they do not recite prayers to Confucius nor do they ask favors of him or expect help from him. They honor him only in the manner mentioned of honoring their respected dead.”¹⁶⁶

Throughout his account on Chinese sects in the *Journals*, Ricci seems not quite at ease in bringing the historical manifestations of Confucianism to the terms of what he understood as religion. But this case is not strong enough to cast doubt on Ricci’s religious knowledge per se despite his inadequate training in the field of theology.¹⁶⁷ As far as Ricci’s account of the “pure theism of early Confucianism” is concerned, he was very good at articulating Christianity as the one “true” religion, as was carefully and consistently rendered in the *Journals*.¹⁶⁸ For Ricci, the single most important element in constituting religion was none other than the recognition of a supreme deity. The notion of heaven and earth in ancient Confucianism was qualified as a solid theological foundation for his alliance with the Literati. It is thus not hard to understand his forceful denunciation of Neo-Confucianism as atheism. Nevertheless, other than the notion of a supreme being, there was really not much in Confucianism that could be viewed as in conformity with Ricci’s conception of religion. There were simply no temples, no priests and ministers, no commandments, and no prayers and hymns; the flip side of which were ancestral rites, funeral rites, and the worship of Confucius. Despite Ricci’s success in securing the alliance between the Jesuits and the Literati, his functional interpretation of Confucian rites was too utilitarian to survive his own death. Without a charismatic figure

¹⁶⁵ Gallagher, 1953, p.97.

¹⁶⁶ Gallagher, 1953, p.97.

¹⁶⁷ See Rule, *K’ung-tzu or Confucius*, pp.10-26.

¹⁶⁸ Gallagher, 1953, pp.94-98.

like him during the later Rites Controversy, the Jesus Society was easily torn apart in the bitter fight between the Vatican and the Chinese emperors.

The Rites Controversy and Chinese Christians' View on Confucianism

The predicament in Matteo Ricci's approach to Confucianism, tactically subdued in his "accommodation method", was greatly intensified in the Rites Controversy following his death. Nicolo Longobardo (1559-1654), the successor to Ricci, challenged the basis of accommodation with Confucianism, though he did not deny the necessity for some sort of engagement with Chinese tradition and culture. With the arrival of Dominicans and Franciscans, the accommodation policy itself was called into question, and the controversy about the participation of Chinese Christians in Confucian rites finally emerged, hence the so-called Rites Controversy.¹⁶⁹ The controversy was over the issue of "terms" and the issue of Confucian rites separately. While the former was about the legitimacy of using the Chinese terms "*tian*" and "*shangdi*" to denote the Christian God, the latter included several aspects: the worship of Confucius, ancestor rites, and funeral rites.¹⁷⁰ With the escalation of the Rites Controversy, the Vatican prohibited the participation of Chinese Christians in all Confucian rites in 1645. The accession of the Yongzheng Emperor in 1723 and subsequent expulsion of the missionaries signified the end of the Rites Controversy.

Although the question on Confucian religiosity in the Rites Controversy was essentially a Jesuit issue, a small number of Chinese Christians did take part in the debate, among them Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, and Yang Tingyun being the most

¹⁶⁹ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.88.

¹⁷⁰ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, pp.44-45.

noticeable. Known as the “three pillars” of Chinese Catholicism, they were as much committed to Confucian teachings as to Christianity. They all insisted that there were no contradictions and discrepancies between Christianity and Confucianism. Li Zhizao regarded Christianity as the “learning of Heaven,” not different from the principles of the six Confucian classics; Yang Tingyun stated that since Christianity was in perfect conformity with Confucian teachings, “we should not take it as heresy”; Xu Guangqi believed that Christianity “does away with idols and completes the way of the literati,” hence it “truly can complete morality, be of assistance to Confucian teachings, and correct the wrongs of Buddhism.”¹⁷¹ When giving reasons why he and other “gentlemen and scholars” had accepted Christianity, Xu wrote:

In their (the Jesuit) country everybody devotes themselves to self-cultivation by serving the Lord of Heaven (*tian*). They had heard of the teaching of the Chinese sages and that everybody (in China) practices self-cultivation and serves Heaven. Their principles were in agreement. So they endured hardships and difficulties, underwent perils and disregarded dangers, and came (to China) to seek mutual verification. They wanted to make everybody good by declaring the meaning of the love of exalted Heaven for men.¹⁷²

Li Zhizao’s intellectual allegiances were in many respects similar to Xu Guangqi’s. Like Xu, Li emphasized the compatibility between Confucianism and Christianity. His position was clearly stated in his preface to an account by his friend Yang Tingyun of the latter’s conversion to Christianity:

If the Way of the Western sages is quite different from Buddhism and Taoism, it is rather similar to the precepts of Yao, Shun, (the Duke of) Zhou and Confucius. Compared with the Buddhists and Taoists, it is contemporaneous with the Hundred Schools and the Nine Traditions, and does not contradict our great Chinese (thinkers); and compared with the teachings of Yao, Shun, (the Duke of) Zhou and Confucius, there are not a few points of comparison with what the six

¹⁷¹ Gu Weimin, *Jidujiao yu Zhongguo Jindai Shehu*, pp.77-78.

¹⁷² Liu Yezheng, *Zhongguo Wenhua Shi*, vol.2, p.663.

classics say about Heaven and *Shangdi*. What is there to be suspicious of here?¹⁷³

In the middle of the Rites Controversy, the Jesus Society in order to defend their accommodation policy once consulted some local Chinese Christians on their views of Chinese culture. These Christians were also Confucian scholars and government officials from the provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang. By referring to Confucian classics, they endeavored to engage in a thorough investigation of Confucian rites with regard to Christian precepts. They focused on interpreting the worship of Confucius, ancestor rites, and folk practices, and tried to emphasize the secular nature and the social and moral values of these traditions. Because their interpretation was in direct response to the attacks on Confucian rites, their approaches were inevitably apologetic to some extent. The first controversy was on the worship of heaven and earth. The attackers charged the worshippers with intention to ask favor from the natural spirits. Zhang Xingyao argued that the practice was an official ritual recognized by the government; it was a sublimation of folk traditions and had theoretical foundations; and finally, it expressed a feeling of retribution rather than awe and request, hence not superstitious.¹⁷⁴

The controversy on ancestor rites was another battleground. The attackers accused the practice as a superstition in which people asked for favor from ancestral spirits. Yan Mo claimed that “the custom of ancestor rites was to testify to people’s love for their ancestors, not to ask for blessings from them.” He believed that when Chinese burnt incense in front of and presented food to their ancestor tablets, they did not expect blessings from the spirits of their ancestors; instead, their behavior was essentially

¹⁷³ Ch’en Shou-I, “Mingmo Yesuhui Shi de Rujaoguan Jiqi Fanying” (The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism and its Response), in Pao Tsun-peng, ed., *Mingdai Congchao* (Taipei, 1968).

¹⁷⁴ Li Tiangang, *Zhongguo Liyi zhi Zheng* (The Chinese Rites Controversy) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1998), pp.188-190.

memorial service, expressing their innermost love for their dear departed.¹⁷⁵ The same argument was also discernible in the defense of the worship of Confucius. Confucian Christians insisted that the custom was no more than respect of the Confucian Way; by doing this, people from all walks of life were able to recognize the values of Confucian teachings; hence Confucius was not worshipped as a god who could determine the fortune of a person. Yan Mo proceeded to articulate the secular nature of the worship of Confucius by contrasting it with the Trinity of Christianity:

The worship of Confucius in our country is not like the worship of Jesus Christ in Christianity, where people ask for favor from God through trinity. The worship of Confucius in our country is in accordance with traditional customs and rituals; it is intended to improve the morality of society. The practice indicates the effort to not forget the origin and basis of who we are. All the praying speeches of the emperors are still extant; they are the words of respecting the Master and of honoring his teachings. People worship Confucius when going to school, because their education has greatly benefited from him. This is just a national ritual of respect dedicated to the Master. It is therefore fundamentally different from the trinity of Christianity.¹⁷⁶

If to sum up the Chinese Christians' interpretation of the relationship between Confucianism and Christianity, no words would be better than "compatibility" and "complementarity." Indeed, all the Confucian converts to Christianity, including the "three pillars" of Chinese Catholicism, emphasized their intellectual allegiances with Confucianism throughout. Their adaptation to Christianity, in all probability, can be eventually attributed to "a general despair at the decadence of morals and public life, and a search for alternatives."¹⁷⁷ While recognizing the difference between Christianity and Confucianism, their interpretation of both was confined to strictly social and moral terms. None of the Confucian Christians saw their conversion as a repudiation of the Confucian heritage; instead, they regarded it as a return to the original values of Confucianism.

¹⁷⁵ Li Tiangang, *Zhongguo Liyi zhi Zheng*, pp.188-190.

¹⁷⁶ Li Tiangang, *Zhongguo Liyi zhi Zheng*, pp.188-190.

¹⁷⁷ Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.59.

Hence, when an orthodox model of belief and practice was finally enforced by the Vatican during the Rites Controversy, the *literati* ceased almost entirely to become Christians.

The Rites Controversy was largely attributable to the intellectual legacy of the Jesuits, Matteo Ricci in particular. But it would be nonsensical to speculate that the incident might have been avoided had there been no ambiguities in the Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism. In any case, Ricci was unable to resolve the predicament in fusing rational orientation with theological aspiration in his approach to Confucianism, hence his difficulty in interpreting Confucian rites against the backdrop of Christianity. The problem resided not in how he interpreted Confucian rites, but rather in the intellectual foundation of his time in general. The European notion of religion was just not ready yet to take any tradition other than Christianity, religious or not, with equal attitude. In some sense, Christianity did become the “one true religion” by projecting its imagery on the sect of the *Literati*, which was not quite compliant with the Christian paradigms. The Jesuit approach to Confucianism simply had more to do with construction than with interpretation.¹⁷⁸ Matteo Ricci, the fountainhead of this massive project, was not ahead of but rather with his time.

The ambiguities embedded in Matteo Ricci’s interpretation of Confucianism testify to the difficulty of applying Christian paradigms to the religious dimension of the Confucian tradition. His problem in reconciling theism with rationality in Confucianism highlights the bitterness of the controversy which has been manifested over the centuries. As the head of the Jesuit mission in China, Ricci would not have been able to transcend

¹⁷⁸ For Confucianism as a construct in the Jesuit approach, see Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization*.

his official obligation, hence his apologetics in approaching Confucianism. “I make every effort to turn our way the ideas of the leader of the sect of the *literati*, Confucius, by interpreting in our favor things which he left ambiguous in his writings.”¹⁷⁹ Ironically, Matteo Ricci’s confession has been turned into a haunting prophecy again and again. While his affection for Confucianism has been widely recognized and appreciated, his panoramic vision has not. As the controversy keeps unfolding, the sarcasm and frustration thus derived linger on.

Kang Youwei and the *Kongjiao* Controversy

The overthrow of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) in 1912 delivered a fatal blow to the institutional Confucianism, which had been closely affiliated with the imperial system for two thousand years.¹⁸⁰ The incident came as a culmination of the long process of social and political disruption that began with China’s humiliating defeat in the Opium War in 1842. As the moving spirit of the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) endeavored “to preserve the country, the race, the teaching”¹⁸¹ by adapting Confucianism and the imperial system to the new conditions that prevailed in the wake of national crisis. Yet as a devoted but eccentric Confucian politician who deeply believed that “half of the Confucian Analects was sufficient to restore world order,”¹⁸² Kang was determined to take a distinct approach not readily understandable to most of his contemporaries. His petition to the Qing emperor to establish Confucianism as a state

¹⁷⁹ In *Fonti Ricciane*, ed. P.M. D’Elia, (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1942-9), N709, II, 296; quoted in Rule, *K’ung-tzu or Confucius*, p.1.

¹⁸⁰ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World: K’ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858-1927* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1975), p.133.

¹⁸¹ Kang Youwei, “Baoguoahui Zhangcheng,” in Ting Wen-chiang, ed., *Liangrengong Xiansheng Nianpu Changbian Chugao* (Taipei: Shih chieh shu-chu, 1958), 1:50.

¹⁸² Kang Youwei, “Kongjiaohui Xu,” in *Kongjiaohui Zazhi*, I, No.2, (March 1913), pp.1-12. The phrase “one half of the Analects” was traditionally attributed to Zhao Pu (A.D. 921-91).

religion, as well as his desperate effort to restore the monarchy in the republic period, made him one of the most controversial figures in the modern history of China. His initiative to interpret Confucianism as “a philosophy of reform” and as “a religion”¹⁸³ remains an uncompromising landmark in the Chinese intellectual landscape even today.

Background and Significance of Kang’s State Religion Campaign

The failure of the Hundred Days Reform and the collapse of the Qing Dynasty did not deter Kang Youwei from striving to achieve his goals. In 1913, Kang became the president of the Confucian Society (Kongjiaohui), which soon began to edit and publish the *Confucian Society Magazine*, and which petitioned the Parliament of the Republic to adopt Confucianism as the state religion.¹⁸⁴ The movement drew vigorous response from some prominent intellectuals who were sympathetic to Confucianism, as well as sham support from many politicians and warlords who did not hesitate to capitalize on the event. But the biggest mistake of the Society has to be attributed to its endorsement of Yuan Shikai’s (1858-1916) usurpation of the Republic, something unforgivably anachronistic in a revolutionary period. With the triumph of the May Fourth Movement and the dissemination of the notions of democracy and science, Confucianism came to be perceived as the prime obstacle to the progress of China and was condemned to its lowest condition in two thousand years.

Perhaps the abortion of Kang Youwei’s state religion campaign was all because of “bad timing”: he “was too much ahead of the intellectual world in the nineteenth century

¹⁸³ See Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World*, Chapter 4.

¹⁸⁴ Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, p.7.

and too much behind it in the twentieth.”¹⁸⁵ He lived in an age when the social and political turmoil dictated a thorough reexamination of Confucianism and its affiliation with the imperial system. Before anyone else could have possibly realized it, Kang sensed the urgency to adapt the empire intellectually and institutionally to the new conditions; but he also lagged behind everyone else by staunchly insisting on restoring monarchy in the age of republic. His endeavor to interpret Confucian classics to prompt his political and cultural reform seemed uncompromising and prophetic at the same time. While his campaign for reform failed to deliver his dreams, his initiative was picked up in a far more radical form during the republic period. The novel notions of equality, freedom, republicanism, and constitutionalism, something Kang Youwei was so desperate to incorporate into his Confucian framework, were imposed on the Chinese mentality precisely at the expense of Confucianism.

Kang Youwei’s endeavor to reconstruct Confucianism was intended to furnish a philosophical basis for institutional reform and for the preservation of Chinese tradition and culture. For this reason, Confucius was portrayed as a reformer instead of a transmitter of tradition in his *Kongzi Gaizhi Kao* (Confucius as a Reformer).¹⁸⁶ While being aware of China’s weakness in science, technology, and political systems, Kang staunchly insisted its superiority to Europe in moral values and ethical principles. He believed that Confucianism possessed more and greater merits than any other major “teachings” of the world, hence its validity in containing cultural values and social norms. There was no problem in borrowing useful ingredients from other cultures, so long as the cultural and ethical authority of Confucianism was not at risk. Kang believed

¹⁸⁵ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World*, p.125.

¹⁸⁶ See Kang Youwei, *Kongzi Gaizhi Kao* (Shanghai, 1897; reprinted, Peking, 1922; Peking and Shanghai, 1958).

that to lose Chinese tradition was to lose the identity of the Chinese race, and that to preserve Confucianism was no less important than to preserve the empire. It is in this sense that Kang Youwei's proposition for state religion was to revive Confucianism by dissociating it from "the rigid state orthodoxy."¹⁸⁷

Liang Qichao (1873-1929), in his biographical tribute to Kang written in 1901, remarked that "my teacher is the Martin Luther of Confucianism" who rendered the greatest service to China in the field of religion.¹⁸⁸ According to Liang, Kang Youwei attained his knowledge of religion through his contact with Buddhism and Christianity in the early years of his life. As a consequence, religious thoughts penetrated Kang's intellectual outlook and he eventually became a "religionist." And he "pledged himself resolutely to performing the tasks of continuing and transmitting [the teachings of] the Sages, and of bringing salvation to all men."¹⁸⁹ In addition to Buddhism and Christianity, Kang was also inspired by religious elements embodied in the Confucian tradition. He firmly believed that "although Confucian teachings center around man, they are based on the Mandate of Heaven and made clear by the powers of spirits," because "Confucius himself honored Heaven and served Shangdi, the Lord on High."¹⁹⁰

Kang Youwei's Interpretation of Confucian Religiosity

Throughout his intellectual life, Kang Youwei did not seem to have hesitated in admitting Confucianism into the family of religions. In an article written in 1886, he divided all religions (*jiaos*) into two groups: this-worldly religions (*yang jiao*), such as

¹⁸⁷ Herrlee G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper, 1960), p.279.

¹⁸⁸ Liang Qichao, *Nanhai Kang xiansheng Zhuan* (Shanghai, 1908), p.67.

¹⁸⁹ Liang Qichao, *Nanhai Kang xiansheng Zhuan*, p.67.

¹⁹⁰ Kang Youwei, "Kongjiaohui Xu," pp.1-12.

Confucianism; and other-worldly religions (*yin jiao*), such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.¹⁹¹ Kang held that Confucianism recognized human feelings and was in conformity with the principles of nature, whereas Buddhism and other *yin jiao* were against social norms and were suppressive of human desires. Regardless of their opposing orientations, however, he believed that both *yang jiao* and *yin jiao* equally counted as religion. Kang seemed to have rested the starting point of his argument on an exploitation of the ambiguous meaning of *jiao*.¹⁹² By ignoring the difference between *jiao* as “teaching” and *jiao* as “religion,” he did not need to take much effort to render Confucianism as “a religion.” In his “Record of Travel in Italy” in 1904, Kang further interpreted religion in light of ethical significance rather than theological implications: “*Jiao* are of various sorts. Some instruct men by means of the divine way, other by means of the human way, still others by means of both the divine and human way. The essential significance of any *jiao* consists in making men avoid evil and do good.”¹⁹³

This nominal approach of religion enabled Kang Youwei to eschew the struggle with the “essence” of religion, something never easily to be resolved. By taking this bold step, he not only immediately differentiated himself from his contemporaries, but also brought himself under fierce attack from the orthodox Confucians. However, such an approach shifted its focus from the theological implications of Christianity and Buddhism to a functionalistic interpretation of Confucianism. For Kang Youwei, it was the ethical significance of “making men avoid evil and do good” that constituted a religion.

¹⁹¹ Kang Youwei, *Kangzi Neiwai Pian*; quoted in Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, “Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng,” in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

¹⁹² Originally meaning “doctrine” or “teaching,” *jiao* was coined to designate the Western concept of “religion” when Western scientific disciplines were introduced to China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹⁹³ Kang Youwei, “Yidali Youji” (Record of Travel in Italy), *Ouzhou Shiyi Guo Youji* (Shanghai, 1905; reprinted, 1906 and 1907), vol.1, p.66.

Therefore, Confucianism as “the human way” was as much, if not more, qualified as a religion as Buddhism and Christianity of “the divine way” were.

In order to reconstruct Confucianism as a religion, Kang Youwei plunged himself into the reinterpretation of the history of Confucianism. In his *Kongzi Gaizhi Kao*, he examined the origin, development, and significance of Confucianism in Chinese history, and presented it as the prime religion practiced by the majority of the population. He endeavored to portray Confucius as “a founder of religion,” declaring that “Confucianism as a religion was created by Confucius,” that “Confucius created the religion in order to implement his institutional reform,” and that “all the six Confucian canons were composed instead of transmitted by Confucius.”¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, Kang Youwei proceeded to establish a parallelism between Confucianism and Christianity in terms of historical and social manifestations. He not only held that Confucianism, just like any other religion, had its own precepts, scriptures, rituals, and followers, but also believed that Confucianism as a religion of the “human way” was of more cultural and social significance.¹⁹⁵

Although Kang Youwei owed his religious knowledge to both Buddhism and Christianity, the paradigms and frameworks in his understanding of religion were primarily drawn from the latter. In all probability, Kang’s proposition to reconstruct Confucianism was inspired by what he had heard of Christian practices, and he valued the strength of Christianity in presenting its message to society.¹⁹⁶ He knew exactly what

¹⁹⁴ Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, “Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng” (Confucianism: A Controversy of Religion or Non-religion), *Zhongguo Zhaxue Shi* (History of Chinese Philosophy), no. 1, 1999; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.440.

¹⁹⁵ Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, “Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng.”

¹⁹⁶ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World*, p.111; See Ch’en Pao-chen’s memorial (Kuang-hsu 24/5/-) in Yeh Te-hui, *Chueh-mi yao-lu* (Changsha, 1905), vol.1, p.16.

to look for in his effort to establish Confucianism as a state religion. For Kang Youwei, Christianity “has the merit of being direct, simple, and unsophisticated; it sets forth one single principle that is at once profound, pertinent, and clear, namely, the brotherhood and equality of men. This is based entirely on truth and suitable for practical application.”¹⁹⁷ As a consequence, Kang’s reconstruction of Confucianism was closely modeled after Christianity. In his petitions to the Qing emperor and to the Parliament of Republic, Kang Youwei suggested that multiple steps be taken to establish a state religion: disseminating the teaching of Confucius, converting all unauthorized temples into Confucian shrines, sending Confucian missionaries to preach to overseas Chinese, instituting a Confucian “church,” and performing weekly services in all Confucian shrines in the country.¹⁹⁸

Despite his claim that all religions “taught the same truths” and “all religions were equal,”¹⁹⁹ Kang Youwei repeatedly reaffirmed his affiliation with Confucianism. His deep commitment to preserving Chinese tradition and culture dictated his construction of religion in favor of Confucianism. However, Kang was aware that the conception about the “secular” outlook of Confucianism, which was widely held by Confucian scholars during that time, was in sharp defiance to the conventional understanding of religion. In order to secure the utility of religion in reconstructing Confucianism, he had to sanction a nominal approach in which he appreciated Buddhism and Christianity not for their spiritual or transcendental values but for their effectiveness as social and moral forces. It is worth noting, though, that Kang’s expedient interpretation of religion was carefully

¹⁹⁷ Liang Qichao, *Nanhai Kang Xiansheng Zhuan*, p.70.

¹⁹⁸ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World*, p.120.

¹⁹⁹ Liang Qichao, *Nanhai Kang Xiansheng Zhuan*, p.67.

rendered in an evolutionistic rhetoric. This can be clearly seen in his statement on the absence of “divine authority” in Confucianism:

Confucius loathed divine authority for its excessive influence [on men] and swept it away...As a founder of religion Confucius represented an advanced stage in cultural progress...Now as men’s intelligence gradually develops, divine authority gradually loses its hold on them. Confucianism therefore suits the present world best.²⁰⁰

For Kang Youwei, Confucianism as “an advanced stage in cultural progress” was clearly a better choice for both China and the world. Correspondingly, Christianity, Buddhism, and all other religions enchanted with the “divine authority,” were discounted on this secular and functionalistic interpretation of religion. In crediting Confucius with sweeping away the “divine authority,” he actually brought Confucianism back from the realm of religion into the realm of moral philosophy. However, Kang did not seem to have had confidence in his evolutionistic and universalistic interpretation of Confucianism. Sensing the urgency to preserve the cultural identity of China, he often appealed to a nationalistic account of his rejection of Christianity:

The Christian religion...is not to be professed in China. For all its doctrines are found in our ancient teachings. Confucianism contains detailed doctrines concerning Heaven; it also contains, in complete form, all such doctrines as concerning the soul, amending evil ways and doing good. Moreover, there is the Buddhist religion, which supplements it. And since the people’s sentiments are against it, how can anyone force it upon them?²⁰¹

Kang Youwei’s interpretation of Confucianism as a religion was a multi-faceted and sometimes self-contradictory construct. He often seemed entangled in a tension between his universalistic vision and his nationalistic persuasion, and his affiliation with Confucianism betrayed his claim concerning the truthfulness of all religions. However, Kang’s functionalistic approach to religion may account for the contradictions embedded

²⁰⁰ Kang Youwei, “Yidali Youji,” *Ouzhou Shiyi Guo Youji*, vol.1, p. 68.

²⁰¹ Kang Youwei, “Yidali Youji,” *Ouzhou Shiyi Guo Youji*, vol.1, pp.132-33.

in his construction. Perhaps, his claim about the “equality” of all religions was part of his intention to make a case for the eligibility of constructing Confucianism as a religion, something that would otherwise be less justifiable. Perhaps, his renunciation of the “divine authority” was an indication of his confidence in having justified Confucianism as a religion. No matter which way it goes, one thing for sure is that Kang Youwei never gave up his Confucian outlook. Whereas his approach to religion can be viewed as utilitarian and expedient, his conviction of the secular character of Confucianism was certainly sincere and profound, so was his commitment to preserving the tradition.

Kang Youwei’s effort to reconstruct Confucianism as the state religion gained whole-hearted support from his pupil Chen Huanzhang (1881-1931), who was also the secretary of the Confucian Society. Chen claimed that Confucianism was a religion simply because all Chinese religious ideas and practices were founded on Confucian teachings, and accused his opponents of viewing religion in too narrow a sense.²⁰² In his monograph *Kongjiao Lun* (On Confucian Religion), Chen endeavored to justify Confucianism as a religion of the “human way,” and projected his evolutionistic vision on Confucianism:

There are all kinds of *jiao* (religions). Some instruct people by means of the divine way, some others by means of the human way. Although they take different paths, they are the same in the sense that they are all *jiao*...Now some claim that *jiao* of the “human way” is not *jiao*. Is this different from claiming that winter coat is not clothes, dinner is not meal...In the age of mythology, *jiao*-founders of the savage world always appealed to ghosts and spirits [to set forth doctrines]; in the age of humanity, *jiao*-founders of the civilized world always emphasized moral values. This is the principle of evolution.²⁰³

²⁰² Chen Huanzhang, “Making Our Original State Religion as the State Religion Does Not Interfere with Religious Freedom,” *Kongjiaohui Zazhi*, I, No.1 (February, 1913), p.1.

²⁰³ Chen Huanzhang, *Kongjiao Lun* (On the Confucian Religion) (Hong Kong: The Confucian Academy of Hong Kong, 1990), pp.15-16.

As a loyal pupil of Kang Youwei, Chen followed his teacher's argument in a very close fashion. His exploitation of the ambiguity of *jiao* was a direct appropriation of Kang's, and his vision on the evolution of religion was not his own invention. Like Kang Youwei, Chen did not have much confidence in his evolutionistic persuasion of religion, and repeatedly appealed to the cultural significance of Confucianism to advance his argument. For him, "Confucianism as a religion has been there for thousands of years"; furthermore, "the Confucian religion is the soul of China. If the Confucian religion survives, China survives; if the Confucian religion prospers, China prospers."²⁰⁴ It is not fair to simply dismiss Kang and Chen's nationalistic approach to Confucianism as a pure rhetoric. As far as their commitment to preserving Confucianism is concerned, there seemed to be no other persuasion that was more powerful than nationalism. After all, the bitter failure of the Confucian religion movement was not as much attributable to the apologetics of Kang Youwei and his followers as to their too desperate involvement in politics of the decidedly wrong trend: their endorsement of Yuan Shikai's usurpation of the Republic at a revolutionary time.

May Fourth Opposition to Kang's Approach of Confucianism

From the very beginning, the Confucian religion movement was swimming against a turbulent current. The general sentiment during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in China was overwhelmingly antagonistic to a state religion. Ironically, one of the earliest opponents to the movement was Kang's another pupil Liang Qichao, once a pious propagator of the Confucian religion before the Hundred Days Reform. After his

²⁰⁴ Chen Huanzhang, "Lun Rujiao Shi yi Zongjiao," "Lun Zhongguo Jinri Dang Changming Kongjiao," in *Minguo Congshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian), II, No.4; quoted in Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, "Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng."

encounter with the revolutionists and his thorough study of Chinese and Western thought, Liang eventually emerged as a major opponent to Kang's movement. In 1902, he openly ushered in his attack on Kang Youwei, declaring that "those who want to preserve the Confucian religion merely put modern thought in Confucian terms and say that Confucius knew all about it...They love Confucius; they do not love truth."²⁰⁵

Liang Qichao asserted that the supporters of Confucianism as a religion were ignorant of the true meaning of religion. "Nowadays those who want to preserve the Confucian religion, upon hearing Westerners saying that China has no religion, become furious right away. They think that Westerners are trying to scheme against them, to humiliate them. This is really ignorant of what is religion."²⁰⁶ Liang then presented his understanding of religion in a positivistic tone:

The so-called religion is specifically referred to belief in superstition. The authority of religion resides beyond the physical body. It takes soul as its lodging place, worship as its ritual, transcendence as its purpose, heaven as its destination, and fortune in the next life as its conviction. Although there are different kinds of religions, they all share the basic features.²⁰⁷

It is clear that Liang Qichao's positivistic vision determined his dismissal of religion as superstition, hence his definition of religion in value-judgmental terms. But he had to bear testimony to his position on Chinese tradition and culture when it came to interpret Confucianism in light of religion. From Liang's point of view, Confucianism was not a religion, because "the nature of Confucianism is different from all religions," and Confucianism would teach "none other than secular and social issues and moral principles."²⁰⁸ However, Liang was not as much opposed to Kang Youwei as it seemed,

²⁰⁵ Liang Qichao, "Baojiao fei Suoyi Zunkong Lun" (To Preserve the Confucian Religion is Not the Way to Love Confucius), *Xinmin Congbao* (New People's Periodical), No.2 (January 15, 1902), p. 69.

²⁰⁶ Liang Qichao, "Baojiao fei Suoyi Zunkong Lun."

²⁰⁷ Liang Qichao, "Baojiao fei Suoyi Zunkong Lun."

²⁰⁸ Liang Qichao, "Baojiao fei Suoyi Zunkong Lun."

as they both tried to assign Confucianism to the realm of moral philosophy, only that Liang declined to make an expedient use of religion. Due to his opposition to Kang Youwei's Confucian religion campaign, Liang is credited by some scholars as formally setting off the modern debate on whether Confucianism is a religion, and remains a benchmark for the non-religion interpretation of Confucianism.²⁰⁹

The first two decades of the Republic saw the most intense and radical attacks on Confucianism, mostly by the May Fourth intellectuals. In their denunciation of Kang Youwei's state religion movement, Confucianism was denied status as a religion as such. Zhang Taiyan (1868-1936), who was not a May Fourth intellectual in a strict sense, firmly condemned the state religion movement as backward, claiming that "China has never had a state religion."²¹⁰ By emphasizing the spirit of humanism in Confucius, Zhang further refuted Confucianism as a religion. "The reason why Confucius has remained a hero in China," he believed, "is because he made history, developed literature, promoted scholarship, and equalized social classes...But he was not a religious founder."²¹¹ Cai Yuanpei (1867-1940), another important figure in the anti-Confucian camp, also strongly denied Confucianism as a religion. He argued that Confucius restrained himself from religious matters, and that since it had neither the form nor the content of a religion, Confucianism should not be made a state religion.²¹²

The most crushing punches against Confucianism were thrown by Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Hu shi (1891-1962), the twin leaders of the May Fourth intellectuals. Both men had unconditional faith in democracy and science. They believed that, since

²⁰⁹ Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, "Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng."

²¹⁰ Zhang Taiyan, "Refutation of the Proposal to Establish Confucianism as a Religion," in Tang Zhijun, ed., *Zhang Taiyan Zhenglun Xuanji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1977), vol.2, pp.689-693.

²¹¹ Zhang Taiyan, "Refutation of the Proposal to Establish Confucianism as a Religion."

²¹² *La Jeunesse* (Xin Qingnian), II, No.5 (January, 1917), p.2.

religion was the opposite of science, it was doomed to be replaced by science. The key argument in their attack on Confucianism was that it was not consonant with modern society, and that Confucian moral teachings were “man-eating” mores.²¹³ Chen Duxiu asserted that the essence of Confucianism “is the basis for the distinction of the superior and the inferior, the noble and the lowly, and so forth, and is therefore incompatible with the modern idea of equality.”²¹⁴ Like other May Fourth intellectuals, Chen strongly denied Confucianism as a religion. He pointed out that the term *jiao* could not be interpreted as “religion” but rather “teaching”; moreover, the very term *kongjiao*, the Confucian religion, was not invented until the Southern and Northern Dynasties (386-589), when a controversy among Confucianists, Buddhists, and Taoists emerged.²¹⁵

To prove that Confucianism was a teaching instead of a religion, Chen Duxiu endeavored to articulate the theological orientation of religion, yet at the same time sanctioned a humanistic interpretation of Confucianism. According to him, the essence of religion was focused on the salvation of soul; hence it was a doctrine of other-worldly orientation.²¹⁶ In contrast, the essence of Confucianism was its transmission of the literati tradition, its establishment of an ethical system; religion and metaphysics were not its concentration.²¹⁷ Furthermore, Chen believed that all religions had to do with deity, to do with the ultimate meaning of life and death, whereas Confucius talked about neither of the issues.²¹⁸ In summary, “the doctrines of Confucius are not the words of a

²¹³ Wing-tsit Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, p.17.

²¹⁴ *La Jeunesse*, II, No.3 (November, 1916), pp.4-5.

²¹⁵ Chen Duxiu, “Zai Lun Kongjiao Wenti” (More on the Confucian Religion), *La Jeunesse*, II, No.5 (January, 1917), p.4.

²¹⁶ Chen Duxiu, “Bo Kang Youwei Zhi Zongtong Zongli Shu,” in *Duxiu Wencun* (Anhui: Anhui Renmin Chubanshe, 1987).

²¹⁷ Chen Duxiu, “Da Yu Songhua,” *ibid.*

²¹⁸ Chen Duxiu, “Zai Lun Kongjiao Wenti,” *ibid.*

religionist,”²¹⁹ therefore, Confucianism possessed neither the essence nor the rituals of a religion.²²⁰

Hu Shi’s attack on the Confucian religion was mainly directed against its affiliation with the endeavor to restore the monarchy. He praised Chen Duxiu and Wu Yu (1871-1949) as the best-known leaders of the campaign “to smash the Confucian shop.”²²¹ In his preface to *Wu Yu Wenlu*, he directly confronted the pro-Confucian religion apologetics, claiming that it did not matter to him whether the Confucian shop was used to sell authentic or counterfeit Confucianism:

The truth is very clear: why is it that the man-eating morality had adopted none other than the Confucian shop-sign? Precisely because it had served the man-eating morality for the past two thousand years, this Confucian shop-sign, no matter authentic or counterfeit, must be taken down, smashed, and consigned to the flames.²²²

Unlike Chen Duxiu, who dived deep into politics and became one of the key founders of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Shi paid most of his attention to academic research, hoping to provide philosophical support for the anti-Confucian campaign. He was deeply committed to eliminating the supremacy of Confucianism and to restoring Confucius as a cultural reformer instead of a religious founder. Hu strongly believed that “Confucius was a humanist and an agnostic,”²²³ or put in other words, “a restoration leader of Confucianism, but not a founder of the Confucian religion.”²²⁴ By faithfully appealing to Western paradigms and methodologies, Hu Shi was trying to depict Confucianism as one of the “hundred schools” in ancient China. For the following generations of scholars in

²¹⁹ Chen Duxiu, “Zai Lun Kongjiao Wenti,” *ibid.*

²²⁰ Chen Duxiu, “Bo Kang Youwei Zhi Zongtong Zongli Shu,” *ibid.*

²²¹ This well-known slogan was raised by Hu Shi in his preface to Wu Yu’s book, *Wu Yu Wenlu* (Shanghai, 1921).

²²² Hu Shi, “Wu Yu Wenlu Xu,” in *Wu Yu Wenlu*.

²²³ Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), p.81.

²²⁴ Hu Shi, “Shuo Ru” (Discussion on *Ru*).

the 20th century, Hu's philosophical orientation in his approach to Confucianism was often too significant to ignore.

The May Fourth Movement changed the Chinese intellectual landscape in many fundamental ways. With the triumph of the anti-Confucian campaign, the state religion movement finally came to an end, so did the effort to interpret Confucianism as a religion. The humanistic and philosophical approach to Confucianism, championed by the May Fourth intellectuals, had decisively shaped the Chinese view on Confucianism ever since. In the aftermath of the May Fourth iconoclasm, Confucianism managed to renovate itself by shifting its orientation from social and political persuasions towards metaphysics, hence the so-called New Confucianism. Even the resurfaced attempt to interpret Confucianism as “a religion” in the late 1970s owed much of its vision and inspiration to the achievements of the May Fourth generation.²²⁵ However, because it directly contradicts the finalized interpretation of Confucianism, the “religion” approach triggered instant controversy over its legitimacy, orientation, and methodology across Chinese academies.

The Latest Controversy: Context, Agenda, and Rhetoric

The latest episode of the controversy on Confucian religiosity formally began in 1978 with Ren Jiyu's proposition that Confucianism be interpreted as “a religion.”²²⁶ As a subversion of the May Fourth conclusion on Confucianism, the proposition drew sharp criticism from across the academia, and soon became one of the most challenging problems for contemporary Chinese scholars. The new development of the controversy

²²⁵ Han Xing, “Wusi Xinwenhua Yundong Changdao zhe de Kongjiao Feijiao Shuo.”

²²⁶ Xing Dongtian, “1978-2000 nian de Rujiao Yanjiu: Xueshu Huigu yu Sikao.”

significantly differs from the previous periods due to its disengagement of political and social agendas.²²⁷ It involves scholars mostly from the disciplines of philosophy and religious studies, and remains an essentially academic phenomenon for most of the time. In addition to Ren Jiyu's ignition of the controversy, the development during the past two decades has been highlighted by several other events: the symposium on Confucian Religion sponsored by the *Wen Shi Zhe* magazine (1998); the formation of the so-called "Confucian Religion School" (1990s); the publication of Li Shen's controversial book *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (1999 & 2000); the flourish of online debate on Confucian religiosity in response to Li Shen's book (2002); and the call for reconstructing Confucianism as a religion by several young scholars (2004).²²⁸

Historical Outlines of the Controversy in Recent Decades

The development of the controversy can be roughly divided into three chronological stages: from 1978 to the mid-1980s is the first stage; from the end of 1980s to 2002 the second; and from 2002 to the current time the third.²²⁹ The first ten years is the formation period of the controversy, involving a small number of scholars, mostly from the department of philosophy. Ren Jiyu was the only scholar who adopted a religious approach to Confucianism and who was on the defensive throughout the debate. After raising his proposition in 1978, Ren wrote a series of articles in the following years to elaborate on his position. His interpretation of Confucianism as a religion provoked

²²⁷ Although in the last two years several scholars have started to address the social and political significance of Confucian religiosity, the controversy itself remains essentially an academic issue.

²²⁸ These pivotal events give us a sense of how the new controversy has so far evolved. All the facts can be found in www.confucius2000.com.

²²⁹ This three-stage division is at most tentative and expedient, and owes its model to Xing Dongtian's two-stage division of the controversy. But Xing does not discuss the development from 2000 on, which I think has grown much more intensified.

vehement criticism from Zhang Dainian and Feng Youlan, the two leading philosophers at that time. Several other scholars also participated in the debate. In general, the controversy during this period was mostly oriented towards historical and textual investigation, whereas methodology per se did not come under scrutiny.

The controversy during the second period was unfolded in much more diversified fashion and on a much greater scale, involving scholars from across the fields of social sciences. Noticeably, overseas interpretation of Confucian religiosity started to be introduced to Chinese academies, including the sociological approach of Max Weber in the late 1980s, and the metaphysical approach of New Confucianism in the 1990s.²³⁰ On the other hand, Ren Jiyu's position on Confucian religiosity gained important support from many young scholars, resulting in the so-called "Confucian Religion School."²³¹ Some of the scholars endeavored to construct theoretical foundation for the religious interpretation of Confucianism. For instance, He Guanghu called for a return to the theological roots of Confucianism to revitalize Chinese culture, though his approach relied heavily on the paradigms of Christianity.²³² But the most spectacular event during this period was the publication of and controversy on Li Shen's voluminous work, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi* (History of the Confucian Religion in China). By interpreting into the Confucian framework the religious practices of the imperial system, the work was intended to provide historical and textual support for Ren Jiyu's approach.²³³ The controversy on Li Shen's methodology and orientation, as well as the debate on

²³⁰ Xing Dongtian, "1978-2000 nian de Rujiao Yanjiu: Xueshu Huigu yu Sikao."

²³¹ Miao Runtian, Chen Yan, "Ruxue: Zongjiao yu Feizongjiao zhi Zheng."

²³² See He Guanghu, "Zhongguo Wenhua de Gen yu Hua—Tan Ruxue de Fanben yu Kaixin," *Yuandao*, No.2 (Tuanjie Chubanshe, 1995); also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

²³³ Whether to incorporate the religious practices of the imperial system into the Confucian framework is one of the key issues in the controversy on Confucian religiosity. The major problem of Li Shen's book is that his approach to such an issue is not held accountable. See Li Shen, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi*.

Confucian religiosity in general, culminated in 2002 in the website www.confucius2000.com, with numerous new scholars involved and many important articles published.

The newest development of the controversy from 2002 on is still searching for its direction, and it is too early to speculate on its prospects. The direction of the debate has so far taken a bold turn from the past two decades by catering to the social and even political utility of constructing Confucianism as a religion. Jiang Qing, Chen Ming, Peng Yongjie, and Kang Xiaoguang are the leading scholars of this initiative. As a prime advocate of the campaign to revive the Confucian tradition, Jiang Qing is especially important due to his religious approach to Confucianism on both theoretical and practical levels.²³⁴ He was aware of the limitation of the Western concept “religion,” and suggested that it only be used when its “expediency” (*fangbian quanfa*) was held accountable.²³⁵ Unlike Ren Jiyu whose religious interpretation of Confucianism was intended to discredit the tradition, Jiang Qing was determined to invest his construction of Confucianism with political significance. His project was firmly aimed at “*fu mei*” (rehabilitation of transcendence), that is, to re-introduce the principle of transcendence to both social and political life. He believed that the success of the reconstruction of Confucianism was ultimately dependent on the prospects of “*fu mei*.” For Jiang Qing, both the Islamic world and the Christian world were problematic because of their “*ji mei*” (extreme transcendence) and “*qu mei*” (renunciation of transcendence), respectively. In order to realize the “harmony of secular and sacred,” Jiang insisted, it was necessary to

²³⁴ Having retired early from his professorship, Jiang Qing retreated to the mountains of his hometown and built “Yangming Jingshe” (Yangming Academy) to lecture on his teachings, a move perfectly reminiscent of a traditional Confucian scholar. The Academy has now become a stronghold of the so-called “cultural conservatism.”

²³⁵ Jiang Qing, “Zhuiqiu Renlei Shehui de Zuigao Lixiang: Zhonghe zhi Mei,” in www.confucius2000.com.

implement “*wangdao zhengzhi*” (kingly politics) instead of democracy through the rehabilitation of Confucian transcendence.²³⁶

Kang Xiaoguang’s approach to Confucian religiosity bears much similarity to Jiang Qing’s, though he claimed himself as the successor to Kang Youwei’s unfinished state religion campaign. Kang’s interpretation of Confucian religiosity is an essential part of his doctrine on “cultural nationalism.” “Today, to re-mention ‘cultural nationalism,’ is not to create an aloof theory on traditional culture, but rather to establish a powerful ideology, to launch a broad and persistent social movement... The key target of the movement is to reconstruct Confucianism as a world religion, compatible to the modern society.”²³⁷ Kang stated that his call for reconstructing Confucianism as a state religion was under no circumstances to stir up a cultural war; instead, it was intended to launch a social movement so as to revitalize the Chinese culture and to rejuvenate the Chinese race. In other words, it was destined to construct a “cultural China” transcendent of any nation-state.²³⁸

Compared to Jiang Qing’s and Kang Xiaoguang’s fundamentalist appeal to Confucianism, Chen Ming’s approach is relatively moderate. He suggested that the question on Confucian religiosity be addressed in two different dimensions: whether Confucianism was a religion in the past; and whether it can or should be constructed as a religion in the modern time.²³⁹ He urged scholars not to treat the question in a mere epistemology dictated by Western paradigms, but rather to take it from study to the street. For Chen Ming, the controversy on Confucian religiosity can only be resolved with

²³⁶ Jiang Qing, “Zhuiqiu Renlei Shehui de Zuigao Lixiang: Zhonghe zhi Mei.”

²³⁷ Kang Xiaoguang, “Wenhua Minzu Zhuyi Lungang,” *Zhanlue yu Guanli* (Strategy and Administration), No.2, 2003; “Wenhua Minzu Zhuyi Suixiang,” in www.confucius2000.com.

²³⁸ Kang Xiaoguang, “Wenhua Minzu Zhuyi Lungang.”

²³⁹ The Recordings of “Confucianism and Religion Symposium” (2), in www.confucius2000.com.

regard to the way Confucianism is reconstructed in light of modernity.²⁴⁰ Peng Yongjie, another scholar in favor of a social approach to Confucianism, asserted that the controversy on Confucian religiosity had both academic and cultural significance.²⁴¹ He believed that reconstructing Confucianism as a religion was an important step to renovating Chinese tradition and culture. He encouraged scholars to participate in the reformation and re-invention of Confucian teachings and rituals, so as to re-institutionalize Confucianism as a religion equivalent to Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam.²⁴²

Approaches and Arguments of the Latest Controversy

To some extent, all the arguments in the controversy in the last two decades can be grouped into three categories: Confucianism as a religion; Confucianism as non-religion; and Confucianism as religious in some sense. But the actual situation is much more complicated since in each of the approaches it is widely disputed how Confucianism should be specifically interpreted. On the religious approach to Confucianism, for instance, there are almost as many definitions as there are scholars. Hence, Confucianism can be defined as a “native religion,” a “political religion,” a “spiritual religion,” a “civil religion,” an “institutional religion,” an “ethical religion,” or even a “special religion,” depending on the scholar’s particular perspective.²⁴³ The efforts to define Confucianism

²⁴⁰ The Recordings of “Confucianism and Religion Symposium” (2), in www.confucius2000.com.

²⁴¹ Peng Yongjie, “Lun Rujiao de Tizhijia he Rujiao de Gaixin” (On the Institutionalization and Reform of the Confucian Religion), in www.confucius2000.com.

²⁴² Peng Yongjie, “Lun Rujiao de Tizhijia he Rujiao de Gaixin.”

²⁴³ These definitions of Confucianism as “a religion” can be seen in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, and in www.confucius2000.com.

as a “special” kind of religion precisely reveal the difficulty in bringing the Confucian tradition to the terms of religion constructed on Western paradigms.

Despite being favored by most scholars in the controversy, the philosophical or humanistic approach to Confucianism also assumes a very complicated outlook. There is hardly any agreement on whether Confucianism should be interpreted with or without regard to religion. Whereas many scholars claim that Confucianism has nothing to do with religion, some others believe that they have a lot of common ground though they belong to separate dimensions. The challenge of this approach is on one hand how to dissociate Confucianism from the imperial system, which had patronized it for two thousand years; and on the other, how to differentiate it from Buddhism and Taoism in terms of metaphysical orientation and social function. However, whether to incorporate the religious practices of the imperial establishment into the Confucian framework is precisely one of the key issues in the controversy. Hence, neglect this problem will put into question the validity of both religious and non-religious approaches to Confucianism.

As the initiator of the “Confucian Religion School,” Ren Jiyu has so far provided a comprehensive and systematic interpretation of Confucianism in terms of religion, though his ideological persuasion is not shared by all of his followers. Ren Jiyu believed that the early Confucianism contained religious consciousness, but it was not yet a religion as such; it started to develop into a religion during the reign of the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, when Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BCE) promoted it to the status of state ideology; the transformation was completed during the Song and Ming periods, resulting in the so-called Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism.²⁴⁴ According to Ren Jiyu, the

²⁴⁴ Ren Jiyu, “Lun Rujiao de Xingcheng” (On the Formation of the Confucian Religion), in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism possessed the essence of a true religion: it recognized Confucius as its religious founder; “*tian, di, jun, qin, shi*” (heaven, earth, emperor, ancestor, and teacher) were commonly worshiped; the Confucian canons were like the scriptures of Christianity; the doctrine of *daotong*²⁴⁵ was the ideological foundation of Confucian denominations; the school systems at both central and local levels were also the religious organizations of Confucianism; and lastly, the school supervisors were also the ministers of Confucian religion. Although Confucianism had neither rituals to admit new members nor definite numbers of believers, it did have followers from all walks of society. Moreover, Ren Jiyu asserted that historically Confucianism had all the backward elements that Christianity had in the medieval period, such as monasticism, obscurantism, and the practice of celibacy; it focused on religious and metaphysical cultivation and held an antagonistic view on science and production. Henceforth, Confucianism had brought tremendous catastrophe to the traditional Chinese society that a feudal-patriarchal theocracy would have.²⁴⁶

Feng Youlan and Zhang Dainian responded to Ren Jiyu’s position on Confucian religiosity by appealing to a philosophical interpretation of Confucianism. Feng Youlan claimed that the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism did not regard Confucius as a religious founder, neither did it recognize a next life beyond the current life; among “*tian, di, jun, qin, shi*,” the last three were humans instead of superhuman beings; all the Confucian canons had historical origins, and were not regarded as the words from God, hence they

²⁴⁵ John Makeham translates *daotong* as “interconnecting thread of the way.” See John Makeham, *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p.56.

²⁴⁶ These views are presented in Ren Jiyu’s series of articles published in the 1980s: “Lun Rujiao de Xingcheng,” “Rujia yu Rujiao,” “Rujiao de Zaipingjia,” “Zhu Xi yu Zongjiao,” and so on. See Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

were not religious scriptures.²⁴⁷ Zhang Dainian also viewed the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism as philosophy rather than religion. He believed that the fundamental difference between religion and non-religion was the belief in the after life, in the “other world.” According to Zhang, there were no personal God, no imperishable soul, no retribution, no other world in the doctrines of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, nor were there religious rituals or prayers. For him the term *rujiao* was the same as *ruxue*, since *jiao* of *rujiao* referred to none other than teachings and doctrines.²⁴⁸

Li Guoquan and He Kerang were also among the early scholars opposing Ren Jiyu’s interpretation of Confucianism as a religion. In their joint article “Rujiao Zhiyi” (Doubt on Confucian Religion), Li and He asserted that all religions were oriented toward the “other world,” but Confucianism always had a this-worldly orientation; although the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism encouraged refraining from physical desires, it differed from religious asceticism; all religions had scriptures in which religious activities, doctrines, and commandments were recorded, whereas the Confucian canons were basically about philosophy and ethics; all religious scriptures prescribed divine authority to their religious founders, but Confucius was never a religious founder and was in no way given such supremacy. Li and He further stated that all religions had formal rituals to admit new members, had a definite number of members, and had ministers and preachers to promote their religion, but Confucianism had none of these elements.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Feng Youlan, “Lue Lun Daoxue de Tedian, Mingcheng, he Xingzhi” (A Short Discussion on the Characteristic, Name, and Nature of the Philosophy of Dao), *Shehui Kexue Zhanxian* (Front of Social Sciences), no. 3, 1982; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

²⁴⁸ Zhang Dainian, “Lun Songming Lixue de Jiben Xingzhi” (On the Basic Nature of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism), *Zhexue Yanjiu* (Study of Philosophy), no. 9, 1981; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

²⁴⁹ Li Guoquan, He Kerang, “Rujiao Zhiyi” (Doubts on the Confucian Religion), *Zhexue Yanjiu*, no. 7, 1981; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

Cui Dahua refuted Ren Jiyu's position on Confucian religiosity from a historical perspective. He declared that the Confucian teaching was not originated from the religious thoughts of the Shang (1600?-1100? BCE) and Zhou (1100?-249 BCE) periods, but rather from the ethical and moral ideas of Zhou; Confucius inherited these ethical and moral ideas from the Zhou period and developed them into his teachings with primarily ethical and humanistic orientation; the development of Confucianism from the Han period to the Song and Ming periods was not a transformation towards religion, but rather a process of self-renovation; although strongly influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism remained predominantly an ethical philosophy.²⁵⁰

Among those who interpreted Confucianism as non-religion, Mou Zhongjian's and Zhang Jian's approach deserves special attention. They declared that along with Confucianism there existed a state religion throughout the history of China. Instead of calling the state religion *rujiao* ("Confucian religion"), they named it as "traditional feudal-patriarchal religion." They believed that to distinguish Confucianism from the "traditional feudal-patriarchal religion" was a crucial step towards resolving both the question on whether Confucianism was a religion, and the question on whether there was a state religion during the medieval period.²⁵¹ Mou Zhongjian regarded Confucianism and the "traditional feudal-patriarchal religion" as two separate institutions; they had impact on each other, but remained independent from each other.²⁵² Yet on the other hand, Mou recognized the close affiliation between Confucianism and the traditional religion, stating

²⁵⁰ Cui Dahua, "Rujiao Bian" (Questions on the Confucian Religion), *Zhexue Yanjiu*, no. 6, 1982; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

²⁵¹ Zhang Jian, "Ruxue yu Zongfaxing Chuantong Zongjiao" (Confucian Learning and the Traditional Feudal-Patriarchal Religion), *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (Research on World Religions), no. 1, 1991; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

²⁵² Mou Zhongjian, "Zhongguo Zongfaxing Chuantong Zongjiao Shitan" (A Preliminary Inquiry into the Traditional Feudal-Patriarchal Religion of China), *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu*, no. 1, 1990; also in Ren Jiyu, ed., *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*.

that “the Confucian doctrine on rites had a lot to do with sacrifices and funerals, and had served as the theoretical foundation for the feudal-patriarchal state religion”; moreover, “both the traditional religion and Confucianism were fruits from the same tree of feudal-patriarchal society, the former being its religious manifestation, the latter its rational manifestation.”²⁵³

In addition to the polarizing positions on Confucian religiosity as mentioned above, there were also some scholars who took a middle path. They believed that Confucianism did possess some religious elements, and thus was not philosophy in a strict sense; yet its this-worldly orientation and its lack of religious organizations and rituals decisively distinguished it from religion; hence, it was a system of thoughts, somewhere between religion and philosophy. Li Zehou asserted that Confucianism commanded a function similar to that of a quasi-religion; though not a religion, it transcended ethics and reached a supreme realm equivalent to religious experience.²⁵⁴ Guo Qiyong viewed Confucianism as a secular system of ethics with ultimate concern. He believed that Confucianism was this-worldly oriented, humanistic, yet at the same time had a religious nature; hence, it was a *renwen jiao* (humanistic religion), with *jiao* meaning both “teaching” and “religion.”²⁵⁵ Huang Junjie asserted that there was a clear presence of religiosity or religious feeling in Confucianism; but this religiosity was not viewed as an institutional religion in terms of traditional Western definition; rather, it referred to a feeling of longing and awe toward the cosmological transcendence by the followers of

²⁵³ Mou Zhongjian, “Zhongguo Zongfaxing Chuantong Zongjiao Shitan.”

²⁵⁴ Li Zehou, “Zai Tan Shiyong Zhuyi” (More on Pragmatism), *Yuandao* (Search the Way), (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1994), no.1.

²⁵⁵ Guo Qiyong, “Ruxue: Rushi de Renwen de you Juyou Zongjiaoxing Pingde de Jingshen Xingtai” (Confucian Learning: A This-worldly, Humanistic, and Religious Spirituality), *Wen Shi Zhe*, no. 3, 1998.

Confucianism.²⁵⁶ In general, this middle approach does not directly respond to the question of whether Confucianism is a religion; instead, it focuses on a metaphysical interpretation of Confucianism. Therefore, it bears great similarity to New Confucianism, which is mainly engaged by overseas Chinese scholars, and which we will turn to in the next section.

Significance and Problems of the Latest Controversy

The latest controversy on Confucian religiosity is a renewed attempt to evaluate the historical significance of Confucianism by appealing to the category of religion. In some sense, it is more determined to explore the possibility and feasibility of Confucianism reinventing itself in the paradigms of modernity. To borrow Chen Ming's words, it is about "whether Confucianism can or should be constructed as a religion in the modern time."²⁵⁷ In all probability, the debate has less to do with religious studies than with the cultural and political concerns of modern Chinese intellectuals. Despite its disengagement from direct social and political agendas, however, the new development of the controversy remains as rhetorical and ideological as it was during the May Fourth period. In addition to its historical complications, the problem also resides in the epistemological difficulty of employing Western paradigms to diagnose a tradition that is intrinsically recalcitrant to any theorizing effort.

The epistemological problem in the controversy involves the conceptualization of both religion and Confucianism. To answer whether Confucianism is a religion, one has to approach two presumed questions: what is religion and what is Confucianism. As has

²⁵⁶ Huang Junjie, "Shi Lun Ruxue de Zongjiao Neihan" (A Preliminary Discussion on the Religious Implications of Confucian Learning), *Yuandao* (Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), no.6.

²⁵⁷ The Recordings of "Confucianism and Religion Symposium" (2), in www.confucius2000.com.

been discussed in Chapter I, the concept of religion in the Chinese textuality is virtually constructed in the paradigms of Christianity.²⁵⁸ It views the “belief in God” as the defining feature of all religions, and prescribes three essential dimensions in constituting a religion: religious feelings and concepts; worship activity and rituals; religious hierarchy and organizations. When employing this tripartite definition of religion to investigate Confucianism, which defies all its generalizations, there emerge two polarizing positions: to engage it in an uncritical and formalistic fashion, or otherwise, to simply dismiss its applicability.

The “Confucian Religion School” scholars tend to apply Western paradigms to the interpretation of Chinese tradition and culture without a legitimate critique. This liability is clearly seen in Ren Jiyu’s indebtedness to both Christian paradigms and Marxist theory on social progress.²⁵⁹ Like the May Fourth intellectuals, Ren Jiyu’s orientation is informed by the ideological persuasion of scientism, in which religion and science are portrayed as incompatible with each other. By forcibly fitting Confucianism into the format of Christianity, Ren is able to interpret it as a religion in a “perfect” sense and discredit it with full justification. Hence, Confucius is likened to a religious founder, “*tian, di, jun, qin, shi*” to superhuman beings, Confucian canons to religious scriptures, Confucian schools to churches, and school officials to ministers and preachers. This formalistic construction is even more discernible in Li Shen’s *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi*, which is aimed at providing historical and textual evidence to Ren Jiyu’s approach.²⁶⁰ He Guanghu, another major scholar of the “Confucian Religion School,” also relies heavily

²⁵⁸ See Chapter One of this dissertation, p.24; also see *Zongjiao Dacidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Religion) (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1998), pp.1-13.

²⁵⁹ Han Xing, “Dalu Rujiaopai de Lishi Dingwei” (A Historical Evaluation of the “Confucian Religion School”), in www.confucius2000.com.

²⁶⁰ Li Shen, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi*, vol.2, p.1096.

on the paradigms and frameworks of Christianity. His call to rehabilitate the theological roots of Confucianism, to borrow Han Xing's words, is to entrust the future of Chinese culture in Christian theology and Western paradigms.²⁶¹

The other tendency in approaching the tripartite definition of religion is to simply dismiss its epistemological applicability in the case of Confucianism. Jiang Qing asserts that the Western concept of religion is not compatible with the inner structure of Chinese culture, and that the value and significance of Confucianism cannot be appreciated in terms of religion. Yet because Chinese culture has been deconstructed and is unable to express itself in its own paradigms, the concept of religion can be employed as an "expedient" (*fangbian quanfa*). Jiang Qing further insists on interpreting the religiosity of Confucianism by appealing to its own conceptual structures, which he believes are "synthetic" (*zonghexing*) as in contrast to the "analytical" (*fenjieshi*) nature of Western paradigms. Hence, it is "wisdom" (*zhihui*) rather than "rationality" (*lixing*) that is used to approach the "synthetic" structures of Confucianism.²⁶² However, Jiang Qing does not elaborate on how his concept of "wisdom" is different from "rationality," neither is he able to approach Confucian religiosity without appealing to Western paradigms. In fact, his interpretation of the "synthetic" nature of the conceptual structures of Confucianism is precisely constructed in Western epistemological frameworks.

The epistemological problem of the controversy on Confucian religiosity is also attributable to the difficulty in conceptualizing Confucianism in a phenomenological sense. Whether to incorporate the religious practices of the imperial system into the Confucian framework is probably the most contested issue in the conceptualization. The

²⁶¹ Han Xing, "Dalu Rujiaopai de Lishi Dingwei."

²⁶² Jiang Qing, "Zhuiqiu Renlei Shehui de Zuigao Lixiang: Zhonghe zhi Mei."

scholar's preference of the terms of *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue* often reveals his/her position on the concerned issue. As has been suggested in Chapter One, those who prefer *rujiao* to *rujia* and *ruxue* tend to adopt an inclusive approach and interpret Confucianism as a religion; in contrast, those who prefer *rujia* or *ruxue* to *rujiao* usually make a clear-cut demarcation between the Confucian teachings and the traditional religious system, and accordingly, interpret the former as the totality of Confucianism.²⁶³ Mou Zhongjian and Zhang Jian are the two representatives of this exclusive approach. But their endeavor to differentiate the “traditional feudal-patriarchal religion” from the Confucian framework seems far from defensible. The close affiliation between the two dimensions deprives any clear-cut demarcation of epistemological accountability.

However, the exclusive approach in the interpretation of Confucian religiosity is not the invention of Mou Zhongjian and Zhang Jian. Hu Shi, the intellectual leader of the May Fourth Movement, had already adopted the same approach in his construction of Chinese philosophy and religion. In his article “Religion and Philosophy in Chinese History,” Hu proposed to call the traditional religious system “Siniticism”;²⁶⁴ on the other hand, he depicted Confucius as “a humanist and an agnostic,” and Confucianism a philosophy.²⁶⁵ But Hu Shi seems to have not resolved the ambiguity in his account of the relationship between the so-called “Siniticism” and Confucianism. At some point, he viewed Confucianism as the “simplified and purified” development of Siniticism;²⁶⁶ yet in other places, he believed that Siniticism included Confucianism (as state religion) and

²⁶³ See Chapter One of this dissertation, pp.37-40.

²⁶⁴ Hu Shi, “Religion and Philosophy in Chinese History,” in Mrs. Sophia Chen Zen, ed., *A Symposium on Chinese Culture* (Shanghai, 1931).

²⁶⁵ Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*, p.81.

²⁶⁶ Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*, p.81.

other religious manifestations.²⁶⁷ Moreover, he insisted that the state patronage of Confucianism during the Han Dynasty was an effort to “found a state religion of Siniticism under the disguise of Confucianism,” because it was so different from the original teachings of Confucius and Mencius.²⁶⁸ Hu Shi’s terminological battle over “Confucianism as a state religion” and “Siniticism under the disguise of Confucianism,” however, reveals the very epistemological difficulty in approaching the relationship between Confucianism and the traditional religious system.

C. K. Yang, a religious studies scholar well known to the Western academia, encountered the same problem as Hu shi did. He recognized that the core of the “original indigenous religion” was the worship of Heaven and its pantheon of subordinate deities, and the worship of ancestors; it was premised upon the classical statement in *Li Ji* (Book of Rites), “All things stem from Heaven, and man originates from ancestors.”²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, Yang regarded Confucianism as a sociopolitical doctrine with religious qualities. He believed that the religious nature of Confucianism was structured in its furtive treatment of the ideas of Heaven and fate as an answer to human problems unaccountable for by knowledge or in moral terms; moreover, Confucianism as a practiced doctrine received support from the cult of Confucian worship and from many supernatural ideas and cults.²⁷⁰ Unlike Hu Shih, Yang remained cautious on the issue of Confucian religiosity and refrained from passing a hasty conclusion. Neither did he tackle the relationship between the classical religion and the religious qualities of Confucianism, nor did he endeavor to distinguish the two. Perhaps he was aware of the predicament that

²⁶⁷ Hu Shi, “Religion and Philosophy in Chinese History.”

²⁶⁸ See Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance*, p.83; also see Hu Shi, “The Establishment of Confucianism as a State Religion during the Han Dynasty,” *Journal of the North Asiatic Society*, 1929, vol. LX.

²⁶⁹ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.23. *Li Ji* is one of the Confucian canons.

²⁷⁰ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.26.

different approaches would lead to diametrically different conclusions on the question of Confucian religiosity.

Another battleground in the conceptualization of Confucianism has to do with how the Confucian canons are interpreted in light of religiosity. One of the most contested issues in this textual approach is the debate on whether Confucius and his followers believed in ghosts and spirits. Whether *Sishu* (Four Books) or *Wujing* (Five Classics) are given the primary importance,²⁷¹ and how the notion of deity is interpreted in these texts, are the two crucial steps in making up an argument. Those who disprove Confucianism as a religion often refer to several places in the *Analects* to support their argument that Confucius did not believe in ghosts and spirits.²⁷² Those who adopt a religious approach to Confucianism argue that Confucius' attitude towards gods and spirits cannot be proved or disproved by the evidence from the *Analects*; since Confucius was the transmitter of the Confucian canons, the *Five Classics* should serve as the primary textual evidence, which they believe will prove that Confucians were not atheists at all.

An equally contested issue in the textual approach is whether *tian* (heaven) in the Confucian canons referred to a personal God. Many scholars dismiss Confucianism as a religion by interpreting *tian* as a cosmological or naturalistic entity, as different from the concept of God in Christianity. The opponents often relate *tian* to *shangdi* and make an analogy between these concepts and the Christian concept of God. Furthermore, they argue that even the Christian God is more than the sense of a personal God; more often,

²⁷¹ While the collective denominations of Confucian canons have varied throughout history, *Sishu Wujing* has emerged as the most popular name in the modern time; *Sishu* (*Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*) are believed to be composed by Confucius and his disciples, whereas *Wujing* (*Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Rites*, *Spring and Autumn*) are the classics that Confucius had transmitted and used to teach his disciples.

²⁷² See *Analects*, 6:20, 7:20, 11:11, in James Legge, tr., *The Chinese Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893).

God is interpreted as the “ultimate,” the “totally other,” the “unfathomable,” and “superhuman being,” etc. And finally, they believe that in Chinese vocabulary and in Chinese sub-consciousness, the implication of “supreme authority” in *tian* has never completely disappeared; the conception of *tian* thus essentially differs from the implications of ghosts and spirits.²⁷³

New Confucianism: A Metaphysical Approach

In addition to the three historically conditioned episodes of the controversy on Confucian religiosity, there also exists a distinctly metaphysical approach to the question, namely, New Confucianism. Unlike the institutional approach of Kang Youwei and the historical critique of the “Confucian Religion School,” New Confucianism explores the significance of Confucian religiosity from philosophical and cultural perspectives. Specifically, it focuses on expounding the spiritual and transcendental values of the Confucian tradition by interpreting it as a religious and ethical system.²⁷⁴ As a response to the intellectual crisis which began with the closing years of the 19th century and reached its height in the May Fourth period, New Confucianism must be understood in the context of the problems facing the May Fourth generation, that is, the crisis of meaning and the reaction against scientism.²⁷⁵ Throughout the 20th century there have emerged three generations of scholars that are engaged in this New Confucian approach, with most of the third generation being overseas Chinese scholars. However, due to the profound impact of the anti-Confucian and anti-Christian campaigns during the May

²⁷³ He Guanghu, “Zhongguo Wenhua de Gen yu Hua—Tan Ruxue de Fanben yu Kaixin.”

²⁷⁴ Han Xing, “Dalu Rujiaopai de Lishi Dingwei.”

²⁷⁵ See Chang Hao, “New Confucianism and the Intellectual Crisis of Contemporary China,” in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.280.

Fourth period, the first generation scholars did not take Confucian religiosity very positively. Instead of rendering Confucianism in terms of religion, they endeavored to elaborate on its philosophical and ethical significance.

As a primary representative of the first generation of New Confucianism, Xiong Shili firmly distinguished Confucianism from religion, especially from Buddhism. He asserted that whereas Buddhism was anti-science, Confucianism contained elements compatible to science and democracy.²⁷⁶ Liang Shuming maintained that Confucius was actually very anti-religion, and refrained from interpreting Confucianism as a religion. Instead, he believed that Confucianism was a system in which “religion was substituted for by ethics and morality” (*lunli dai zongjiao*).²⁷⁷ Feng Youlan also insisted that Confucianism was not a religion; he observed that Chinese “did not care about religion very much, because they were extremely concerned about philosophy...in philosophy they found the satisfaction of their other-worldly pursuit.” The exact advantage of Confucianism, according to Feng, was that it was a tradition where “philosophy had taken the place of religion” (*zhexue dai zongjiao*).²⁷⁸

The second generation of New Confucianism, especially Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan, took a different turn from the first generation, engaging Confucian religiosity with more positive perspectives. They realized that the most profound and most significant foundation of Western civilization was none other than religion, i.e., Christianity. In order to counter the influence of Christianity and to rejuvenate Chinese culture, they endeavored to explore the religious dimension of Confucianism precisely by

²⁷⁶ Guo Qiyong, “Dangdai Xinrujia Dui Ruxue Zongjiaoxing Wenti de Fansi.”

²⁷⁷ Liang Shuming, *Liang Shuming Quanji* (The Complete Collection of Liang Shuming) (Shandong: Shandong Renmin Chubanshe), 1989, vol.1, p.469; 1990, vol.3, pp.88-89.

²⁷⁸ Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo Zhexue Jianshi* (A Short History of Chinese Philosophy) (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 1985), pp.8-9.

appealing to the paradigms and frameworks of Christianity. The publication of the famous “Manifesto for a Reappraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture” in 1958 indicated that New Confucianism had constituted a systematic interpretation of Confucian religiosity.²⁷⁹ The Manifesto declared that in contrast to the Western misconception of Confucianism as in short of transcendence and religious spirit, the Chinese experiences of religiosity, morality, and even politics were all harmonized in the Confucian tradition. The Manifesto further stated that Confucianism was not composed of moral preaching and rigid commandments, rather, it was a metaphysical system in which moral practice and religious spirit were perfectly unified. Although the Manifesto did not formally present Confucianism as a religion, it laid the foundation of Tang and Mou’s orientation in their approach to Confucian religiosity.

In their later works, both Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan endeavored to articulate the point that Confucianism had a common ground with all the advanced religions of human kind, namely, its religiosity. They believed that as an “ethical religion,” a “humanistic religion,” Confucianism was transcendent and immanent at the same time, and had both sacred and secular qualities. This approach can be clearly seen in Tang Junyi’s writing:

In Confucianism the individual is encouraged to employ his mind to the utmost and thereby to know his own nature and to know Heaven. He is expected to practice the utmost sincerity, like spiritual beings, and to become aware that his own mind is nothing other than the mind of Heaven; that man is a Heavenly man, and that there is no god outside him. Here we assuredly have the supreme realm of the spirit.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ The Manifesto was drafted by Tang Junyi and co-signed by Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, and Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang), with the title of “Wei Zhongguo Wenhua Jinggao Shijie Renshi Xuanyan.” An English translation of the Manifesto is in Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (London: Vision Press Ltd., 1958 & 1962).

²⁸⁰ Tang Junyi, “The Spirit of Religion and Modern Man,” in Douglas Lancashire, tr., *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), p.49.

Meanwhile, Mou Zongsan tried to interpret Confucian religiosity in the aspects of “practice” and “principle.” By doing this, he was able to admit Confucianism into the family of religion despite its obvious lack of institutional features other religions had. The barrier between Confucianism and religion was thus effortlessly abolished in Mou’s metaphysical approach.

[W]e can say that religion can be viewed from two aspects: 1) practice and 2) principle. From the standpoint of practice, Confucianism is not a religion in the usual sense since it has not developed ceremonies common to other religions. What it has done is to transform religious ceremonies into the Rites and Music which serve as rules of conduct for daily living. But, in principle, it has a highly religious character. Indeed, it has a most perfect religious spirit. Its religious consciousness and religious spirit are entirely imbued with moral discernment and practical morality. This is because its emphasis is on how a person should embody and manifest the Way of Heaven.²⁸¹

The scholars of the third generation of New Confucianism include Tu Wei-Ming, Liu Shu-Hsien, Cheng Chung-Ying, and others. With a thorough understanding of Western religions and philosophies, they tried to engage in a more aggressive approach to Confucian religiosity. They were no longer satisfied with articulating the transcendental values and religious spirit of Confucianism by appealing to the paradigms of Christianity. Instead, they were determined to stage inter-religious dialogues between Confucianism and other world religions, and trumpeted the coming of a third epoch of Confucianism. Tu Wei-Ming, the leading scholar of the third generation New Confucianism, focused on expounding the significance of Confucianism “being religious” rather than being “a religion.” He held that “the question of being religious is crucial for our appreciation of the inner dimension of the Neo-Confucian project,” and that Confucian religiosity should

²⁸¹ Mou Zongsan, “Confucianism as Religion,” in Douglas Lancashire, tr., *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith*, p.39.

be defined in light of the individuals' engagement in "ultimate self-transformation as a communal act."

The Confucian "faith" in the intrinsic meaningfulness of humanity is a faith in the living person's authentic possibility for self-transcendence. The body, the mind, the soul, and the spirit of the living person are all laden with profound ethicoreligious significance. To be religious, in the Confucian sense, is to be engaged in ultimate self-transformation as a communal act. Salvation means the full realization of the anthropocosmic reality inherent in our human nature.²⁸²

The difference between the metaphysical approach of New Confucianism and the historical approach of the "Confucian Religion School" is deeply structured. To a large degree, this difference can be traced to the discrepancy of their epistemological frameworks. The scholars of the "Confucian Religion School" were mainly trained in Marxist ideology and methodology, which essentially derived from the continental rationalism and the anti-Christian tradition of Europe; the scholars of New Confucianism, by contrast, drew their ideological and methodological inspiration from the liberal tradition of the West (primarily America), in which the values of democracy, freedom, cultural diversity, Christianity, and all kinds of new religions were respected.²⁸³ While the scholars of the "Confucian Religion School" interpreted Confucianism as "a religion" by focusing on its institutional establishment and historical development, the scholars of New Confucianism tended to emphasize the "religiosity" of Confucianism by elaborating on its immanent and transcendental dimension. However, with the increasing communication between mainland and overseas Confucian scholars, the difference between the two approaches has been slowly but steadily abolished. The ideological persuasion of many mainland scholars, once strongly against Confucianism, has been

²⁸² Tu Wei-Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood As Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp.64, 132, 133.

²⁸³ Han Xing, "Dalu Rujiaopai de Lishi Dingwei."

gradually turned into support for it. A suggestive example of this transformation is the latest reemergence of the social and political approach, represented by Jiang Qing, Chen Ming, and others, in which the hostile attitude towards Confucianism, as manifested in the position of the “Confucian Religion School,” is completely rectified.

CHAPTER III

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTROVERSY ON CONFUCIAN RELIGIOSITY

The history of the controversy on Confucian religiosity suggests that the scholarly effort to engage Confucianism in the category of religion has been greatly compromised by the cultural and socio-political priorities of the Chinese intelligentsia. Even when the controversy reemerges as primarily an academic issue in the past two decades, the epistemological consideration is still deeply entangled with ideological persuasions. This is not to say, however, that the question of defining Confucianism has less to do with epistemological principles than with cultural and socio-political terms, much less that the reconstruction of Confucianism in the paradigms of modernity can only be engaged on cultural and socio-political agendas. The discourse “Is Confucianism a religion?” is, first and foremost, formulated as a hermeneutic construct, and has to be addressed in accord with the parameters of epistemology. The concentration on academic discussion in the latest controversy precisely signifies its epistemological significance. The cultural and socio-political significations embodied in the controversy, therefore, are constituent of the textuality of such a hermeneutic construct. Only in this perspective can we understand “how the category of modern religion fared among Chinese themselves,” and how “they imagine[d] their own cultural traditions with respect to that category and in the light of their incorporation into the global system.”²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Peter Beyer, “The Modern Construction of Religions in the Context of World Society: A Contested Category in Light of Modern Chinese History,” in <http://aix1.uottawa.ca/~pbeyer/chinese%20history.htm>.

Defining Confucianism in the category of religion involves the formulation of both the definiens “religion” (or, in the Chinese language, *zongjiao*) and the definiendum “Confucianism” (*rujia*, *rujiao*, *ruxue*) simultaneously. Since both concepts in the Chinese textuality are constantly subject to theoretical construction, it is imperative to investigate the methodological condition on which the project of defining Confucianism is actually established. Richard Robinson maintains that definitions are not propositions with a truth-value, but rather proposals with an instrumental utility.²⁸⁵ This methodological position suggests very strongly a pragmatic approach to definitions. Put in this perspective, the effort to define Confucianism in terms of religion cannot be considered as describing its “essence” as such, but rather as a proposal to construct Confucianism within a specific context. It therefore makes much less sense to ask a straightforward question of whether Confucianism *is* or *is not* a religion than to ask whether it is appropriate and useful to conceptualize Confucianism with respect to religion in a particular context.

The controversy on Confucian religiosity provides both a source and a test case for new ideas about Confucianism and about religion as well. The difficulty in defining Confucianism in the light of religion challenges the accepted assumptions, paradigms, and perspectives in formulating both constructs. To some extent, the confrontation between the conception of religion and that of Confucianism in this methodological experiment signifies the magnitude of the last, and probably the most significant, project of charting the Confucian territory in accordance with Western scientific principles and norms. The shift from Confucian paradigms to the paradigms of modernity in the modern Chinese society determines that the integrity of Confucianism has to be testified no less significantly in the category of religion than in ethics, philosophy, politics, and any other

²⁸⁵ Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.5.

academic disciplines. Meanwhile, the generic and profound resistance of Confucianism to the theorizing effort of the category of religion presents an incisive deconstruction of the latter's claim to "universal validity and unique truth," which has been widely regarded as hegemonic and is increasingly contested by the plurality and diversity of religions or religious manifestations in the world.²⁸⁶ The resistance also suggests the growing constraint of the conventional and essentialist understanding of "religion" in cross-cultural studies, as extensively addressed by anthropologists and religious studies scholars who are conscious of the difficulty of cross-cultural representations. Hence, the validity and utility of any definition of religion should only be recognized with respect to the fact that it is no more than a conceptual instrument, decidedly ambiguous, provisionally applicable, and constantly revisable.

The Pragmatic Turn in Defining Religion

The emergence of religion as a modern concept and as an academic category is generally attributed to the modernizing process of Western societies in the past three centuries, in which institutional differentiation has dissolved religion from the public realm and transformed it into a matter of private persuasion and individual practice. As Benson Saler has put it, "the historical crystallization of religion in the West constitutes a long-term, complex process of bounding and clarification in tandem with shrinkage and weakening."²⁸⁷ It should also be noted that this process of "historical crystallization" has largely contributed to the semantic ramifications entrenched in the conceptualization of

²⁸⁶ Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts, and Contests* (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1999), p.503.

²⁸⁷ Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), p.209.

religion. From the 16th century and onward, Western readers have been constantly confronted with two distinct and often confusing senses of the concept of religion: the sense of “a religion” and the sense of “religion.” According to *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the first sense refers to “a particular system of faith and worship,” whereas the second sense designates “recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship.” In the sense of “a religion,” the concept points to a class of things in the genus “systems of belief and behavior,” with Christianity, Islam and the like being particular examples. In the sense of “religion,” however, the term refers to a “general mental and moral attitude,” which is part of human nature and which is often manifested in the beliefs and behavior of particular religions.²⁸⁸

The semantic ramifications in the Western conception of religion correlate with two discernibly different approaches to the study of religion, which have so far established definitions of religion that are sharply divided between the position to treat it as an analytical tool in academic research and the position to depict it as representing the one only *sui generis* dimension of human experience.²⁸⁹ The “analytical” position regards “religion” as a conceptual instrument that labels, divides, abstracts, and describes portions of human behavior and belief in relation to other equally constructed aspects of behavior and belief; the second position, however, refers to those essentialist scholars who staunchly maintain that the focus of research on religion should transcend historical

²⁸⁸ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), p.1697.

²⁸⁹ The contrast between the two approaches has been characterized in different terms. For example, in Russell T. McCutcheon, it is “taxonomic vs. essentialist”; in Jan Platvoet, “operational vs. essentialist” or “inductive vs. deductive”; and in Timothy Fitzgerald, “non-theological vs. theological.”

categories of thought and communication in human society.²⁹⁰ The analytical approach is inductively oriented and is interested in provisionally delimiting “religion” as an object of study; and its validity and applicability are prescribed by the historical particularity of religions to which it is to be applied. In contrast, the essentialist approach is deductively oriented and is committed to constructing “real definitions” of religion; it is concerned with universal validity and applicability of a definition, which is in turn employed to discriminate “religions” and “fake religions” and to pass value judgments on all other traditions with regard to the paradigmatic religion of its own.²⁹¹

The pragmatic turn in the discipline of religious studies occurred in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, as exemplified in the “paradigm shift” of the Dutch Comparative Study of Religions and in the institutional changes of the religion departments of American universities. Jan Platvoet has noted that the “paradigm shift” in Dutch academies serves mainly to develop critical reflexive methodologies for a secular and agnostic study of religions; hence the approach of “methodological agnosticism” or “metaphysical neutralism.”²⁹² Jordan Paper has also noticed that since the mid-1960’s the expectations of religious studies faculties in American universities have changed, and graduate students are no longer required to be qualified Christian ministers to do advanced study in religion.²⁹³ Jan Platvoet attributes the pragmatic turn in the Western study of religion to a host of factors: the diffuse, untidy, and prototypical nature of the modern terms of “religion” and “religions”; the synchronic and diachronic differences between single

²⁹⁰ Russell T. McCutcheon, “The Category ‘Religion’ in Recent Publications: A Critical Survey,” *Numen* 42:284-309.

²⁹¹ Jan Platvoet, “The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 1990, 2/2, pp.181-183.

²⁹² Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.246.

²⁹³ Jordan Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp.12-13.

religions; the semantic ramifications of the concept of “religion” in Western linguistic history; the distinctly different conceptualizations of “religion” in some other non-Western cultural traditions; the absence of a concept of “religion” in all the other societies; the growing trend in methodological reflection that advocates a transition from essentialist to instrumental, or “operational,” definitions of religions.²⁹⁴

The dissolution of the conviction of universalism and essentialism has given rise to various strategies in coping with the limitation of the conventional conception of religion: from complete dismissal of the term “religion” (W. C. Smith, Timothy Fitzgerald), to insistence on the “core variable” of its definition (Melford Spiro), to appealing to bio-science and cognitive theory to sanction a polythetic approach to religion (Benson Saler, Martin Southwold). While my examination of these scholars’ approaches is not intended to be a comprehensive demonstration of the latest theoretical development of religion, it may be sufficient to show how the pragmatic turn has shifted the scholarly attention from universal validity to particular applicability of definitions of religion. It is hoped that by surveying these scholars’ assumptions, paradigms, and perspectives in conceptualizing religion, one is provided with useful insights and visions in understanding the difficulty, and possibly, significance, of defining Confucianism in the category of religion.

W. C. Smith’s renunciation of the term of religion

W. C. Smith’s observation of the difficulty of “religion” in representing religious diversity and fluidity is certainly insightful. What he has revealed in *The Meaning and End of Religion* is the semantic distortion between the signifier (the term “religion”) and the signified (the religious feeling of a person). He therefore suggests dispensing with the

²⁹⁴ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.465.

noun “religion” while retaining its adjective and adverbial forms, which he believes are useful analytical tools in that “living religiously is an attribute of persons.”²⁹⁵ But Smith’s campaign for adopting the terms of “cumulative tradition” and “faith” to replace “religion” at social and personal levels, respectively, seems immature and has even been abandoned by himself. This is so not just because Smith’s new terms might create as many difficulties as does “religion”; a more serious difficulty is to be found in the very nature of employing discursive language to signify the so-called “meta-empirical”²⁹⁶ dimension of human experience. Religion, like culture, race, kinship, marriage, and many other terms that have to do with continuous anthropological findings, is far from being well defined, and as a consequence, continues to evoke wide differences in meaning and to instigate heated controversy among scholars.

The reason that Smith’s renunciation of the term of religion draws so much attention is probably due to his dissolution of the essentialist presupposition that there is some essence embodied in the entity of religion. Smith asserts that modern attempts to define religion are often animated by a commitment to the idea of “essence,” which inevitably leads to the search for definitions that presumptively point to unchanging constituents or features of things. In the particular case of defining religion or religions, Smith believes, the quest for essences is misdirected and yields reifications. “Neither religion in general nor any one of the religions,” he contends, “is itself an intelligible entity, a valid object of inquiry or concern either for the scholar or for the man of faith.”²⁹⁷ As a consequence, “the participant can see very clearly that the outsider may know all about a religious

²⁹⁵ W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p.195.

²⁹⁶ A number of terms have been employed by scholars to designate the nature of the religious dimension of human experience held as *sui generis*, such as meta-empirical, non-verifiable/non-falsifiable, etc.

²⁹⁷ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.12.

system, and yet may totally miss the point. The outsider may intellectually command all the details of its external facts, and yet may be—indeed, as an outsider, presumably must be or demonstratively is—untouched by the heart of the matter.”²⁹⁸

Smith’s proposition on renouncing “religion” is echoed by Timothy Fitzgerald in an ironic way, because, while having come to the same conclusion, Fitzgerald’s approach to the study of religion is quite different from Smith’s. In contrast to Smith’s emphasis on the transcendent nature of religious experience, Fitzgerald is mainly engaged in a critique of religion as “a form of mystification generated by its disguised ideological function.”²⁹⁹ By analyzing both the theological and non-theological uses of “religion,” Fitzgerald bisects the study of religion into “ecumenical theology under its theoretical disguise of phenomenology” and “a hermeneutical problem of interpreting cultures.” He argues that the control over the meaning of religion by ecumenical theology is sanctioned by a theological agenda, and that even the non-theological use of religion is also plagued by “cognitive imperialism.” Hence, “the concept of religion and religions as genuine objects of knowledge in the world, and religious studies as a distinct set of methodologies, is an ideological assertion which strives to recreate the Other in its own image.”³⁰⁰

Both Fitzgerald and Smith are deeply unsatisfied with the concept of religion, which they believe is inextricably associated with different and conflicting presumptions, perceptions, and purposes. Smith’s aversion to the term manifests his struggle to hold on to the *sui generis* claim of religion as a unique domain, which is certainly an essentialist position itself. Fitzgerald’s critique of religion as an ideological construct, on the other

²⁹⁸ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.134.

²⁹⁹ Timothy Fitzgerald, “A critique of ‘religion’ as a cross-cultural category,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 1997, 9: 91.

³⁰⁰ Fitzgerald, “A critique of ‘religion’ as a cross-cultural category,” p.98.

hand, is based on his social and political interpretation of religions. The strength of his approach rests in its Foucauldian diagnosis of power struggle deeply entangled in the contest of defining religion. However, Fitzgerald's suggestion on dismissing religion as a cross-cultural analytical concept, not unlike Smith's, is overloaded with unwarranted presumptions and promises. To say the least, the very term of "culture," which he uses uncritically in his critique of religion, needs to be subjected to cross-cultural critique as well, even if not in his sense of ideological deconstruction.

Melford Spiro's criterion of "intra-cultural intuitivity"

In his famous essay "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," Melford Spiro champions a substantive definition of religion as in opposition to the functionalist approach of Durkheim. He emphasizes the utility of definitions of religion for marking out a subject matter or field of study. In order to achieve this goal, Spiro insists that a definition must satisfy not only the criterion of cross-cultural applicability but also that of "intra-cultural intuitivity"; hence, any definition of religion which does not include the belief in "superhuman beings" who have power to help or harm man is counter-intuitive.³⁰¹ The problem of functionalists, Spiro believes, is their "counter-intuitive" definitions of religion, by which communism, the stock market, baseball, and the like are invalidly included in the family of religions. In Spiro's point of view, definitions of religion should allow place to conventional cultural meanings already associated with the term, that is, the pre-reflective intuitions of a modern Western scholar should serve as the true foundation for any acceptable definition of religion.

³⁰¹ Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), p.91.

Spiro's call for a substantive definition of religion makes a very strong case in the discussion on methodologies of anthropology and of religious studies. However, his essentialist approach to religion, which is discernible throughout his essay, is likely to dampen his aspiration for a cross-cultural application of the concept of religion. He argues that "the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or to harm man approaches universal distribution, and this belief—I would insist—is the core variable which ought to be designated by any definition of religion."³⁰² He also maintains that, viewed systematically, "religion can be differentiated from other culturally constituted institutions by virtue only of its reference to superhuman beings."³⁰³ While Spiro's notion of "core variable" fits the prototypes of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam perfectly, his claim of its "universal distribution" is still a highly disputable issue. It could be said that inasmuch as Spiro's concept of religion is engaged in these prototypical religions, and inasmuch as scholars write largely for Western audiences, his approach has practical importance. This is, unfortunately, not the case.

As Jan Platvoet has pointed out, the general purpose of a definition of religion is to clarify the precise meaning in which scholars use the term when communicating their findings to the scholarly community for critical testing, and to the general public for information.³⁰⁴ In other words, cross-cultural studies of religion involve both a process of exploration in which scholars bring their prototypical understanding of religion to engage previously unknown cultural phenomena, and a journey of going home in which scholars utilize their findings to revise or reform their conceptions of religion and to scrutinize their own traditions. With the discovery of the peculiarities of other religions grows, the

³⁰² Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.94.

³⁰³ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.96.

³⁰⁴ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.260.

prototypical understanding of religion undergoes continuous reformulation. The problem of Spiro's essentialist approach, as is shown in his discussion on Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, is to treat the "belief in superhuman beings" as an unchanging principle which refutes such a process of reformulation.

In order to promote his substantive definition of religion, Spiro rejects Durkheim's functionalist definition of religion on both factual and methodological grounds. On the factual ground, he maintains that Durkheim is wrong in his "atheistic" interpretation of Theravada Buddhism, which he believes is the opposite because "the Buddha is certainly a superhuman being," and "is believed to protect people from harm."³⁰⁵ By reading into Theravada Buddhism the "core variable" of his definition of religion, i.e., "the belief in superhuman beings," Spiro thus strategically incorporates Buddhism into the category of religion. Feeling comfortable enough with his construction of religion, he even proceeds to entertain his readers by hypothetically backing off from his "theistic" assertion on Theravada Buddhism when discussing the Burmese society. Hence, he firmly declares, "even if Theravada Buddhism were absolutely atheistic, it cannot be denied that Theravada Buddhists adhere to another belief system [the *nat* worship] which is theistic to its core; and if it were to be argued that atheistic Buddhism—by some other criteria—is a religion and that, therefore, the belief in superhuman beings is not a necessary characteristic of 'religion,' it would still be the case that the belief in superhuman beings and in their power to aid or harm man is a central feature in the belief systems of all traditional societies."³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," pp.91, 92.

³⁰⁶ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.93.

Even a glimpse of Spiro's account of the Burmese society will spot a shift of argumentation in his approach, that is, a shift from arguing Theravada Buddhism as "theistic" to arguing all the traditional societies as "theistic." In so doing he seems to have begged the question on defining Theravada Buddhism, and therefore falls into the trap of "religion-plus," as Martin Southwold has illustrated.³⁰⁷ Even if, as he argues, scholars could face the consequence of defining Theravada Buddhism as "not a religion," due to his value-judgment free definition, he still has to explain how it is possible that "it would have stimulated fieldwork in these...Buddhist societies."³⁰⁸ Without a "heuristic" definition of religion to rely on, few Western scholars would have been informed about the comparability of Theravada Buddhism with religions in the first place. The same problem can also be discerned in Spiro's approach to Confucianism, whose ignorance of superhuman beings' role in human affairs, he believes, accounts for the "dramatic conquest of China" by Mahayana Buddhism (with a pantheon of gods, demons, heavens, and hells).³⁰⁹ Regardless of the validity of Spiro's account on either Confucianism or Mahayana Buddhism, the shift in his argumentation evades the question on defining Confucianism in terms of religion. Once again, his approach fails to inform the scholarly community about the comparability of Confucianism with religions. It is evident that, according to Spiro's substantive definition of religion, both the Theravada Buddhist societies and the Confucian societies are inevitably to be regarded as "apparently anomalous."³¹⁰ As far as this liability of ethnocentrism is concerned, therefore, Spiro's

³⁰⁷ Southwold suggests that if Buddhism is not viewed as a religion, one has to explain how a non-religion can come so uncannily to resemble religions, and that since the comparison of Buddhism with religions is so interesting and important, one should have to form a super-class, called say "religion-plus." See Martin Southwold, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," in *Man* (1978) 13, 3: 367.

³⁰⁸ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.89.

³⁰⁹ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.94.

³¹⁰ Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," p.89.

criterion of “intra-cultural intuitivity” in defining religion runs head on to his claim of “cross-cultural applicability.”

Benson Saler’s notion of “default values”

Benson Saler’s *Conceptualizing Religion* is primarily engaged in an examination of the possibility of transforming “a folk category,” i.e., the concept of religion, into “an analytical category” that will facilitate trans-cultural research and understanding. Inspired by Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance and by the prototype theory in cognitive science, Saler tries to devise a satisfactory scheme of classification that would enable scholars to decide what is or is not a form of “religion.” He hence renounces essentialist or “monothetic” definitions of religion, and promotes a multi-factorial or polythetic approach, which he believes will provide great services to anthropological studies. Saler especially emphasizes the utility of unbounded analytical categories and the importance of key examples, proposing “that we self-consciously conceptualize ‘religion’ as an analytical category with reference to, but not in actual terms of, our personal and changeable understandings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that we regard our understandings of those familial cases as foregrounding what is notably prototypical of the category without attempting to draw sharp boundaries around that category.”³¹¹

Benson Saler maintains that the essentialist intention to establish boundaries in conceptualizing religion is doomed to fail and is therefore undesirable. He urges scholars to acknowledge the culturally entrenched nature of their starting prototypes in their cross-cultural studies. To transcend this prototypical prejudice, he contends, it is imperative to conceive all the folk notions, such as religion, race, kinship, and others as unbounded

³¹¹ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.214.

categories. These unbounded categories are to be distinguished in terms of loose sets of family resemblances and can only be judged on a case-by-case basis in comparison to best-case or prototypical examples. Religion in Saler's understanding, therefore, is "a graded category the instantiations of which are linked by family resemblances."³¹² Since Western religions are the prototypes used by most scholars of religion, it is especially important to recognize the perspective-bound nature of the category of religion when studying other cultural settings. By breaking down the "hard-and-fast boundary between 'religion' and 'non-religion'", Saler hence asserts, a multi-factorial/polythetic approach "renders religion an affair of more or less rather than, as in the digitized constructs employed by essentialists, a categorical matter of 'yes' or 'no'."³¹³

Saler's account on "default values" or "default assignments" in defining religion, however, deserves special attention when Spiro's principle of "intra-cultural intuitivity" is concerned. According to Saler, "a default assignment is broadly characterized as an attribution not directly and fully specified by knowledge of the situation at hand... [It] is made on the basis of a knowledge of, and expectations derived from, other cases that are apperceived to resemble the one at hand."³¹⁴ Saler maintains that for numbers of Westerners theistic presumptions and expectations are frequently invoked when dealing with the issue of conceptualizing religion. In such a case, the prototypical notions about the "Judeo-Christian God" function as "default values" in their schematization of religion. In the cross-cultural studies of religion, Saler asserts, the demand for a critical thinking requires the detachment of various default values from the scholar's interpretive structures. In so doing, "critical thought about religion can be advanced by fashioning an

³¹² Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, xiv.

³¹³ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.25.

³¹⁴ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.224.

explicit analytical approach that both allows for our conventional Western schemata and their default assignments and at the same time prepares us to detach (override) whatever values we may need to discard or supplant in our particularized attentions to the world.”³¹⁵

It is worth noting that Saler’s account on “default values” is significantly different from Spiro’s concept of “intra-cultural intuitivity,” though the two notions might look intuitively similar. Several differences can be easily discerned in their approaches: the “default values” in Saler’s sense are constantly subject to detachment or overriding when situations demand so, whereas Spiro’s “intra-cultural intuitivity” serves as an unchanging principle to determine what is or is not a religion; Saler is committed to dissolving the “either/or” situation in conceptualizing religion, but Spiro is rather concerned about the boundary problems of definition; while Saler is aware of and intended to tame, though not to transcend, the limitation of ethnocentrism in the prototypical understanding of religion, Spiro’s idea of “intro-cultural intuitivity” can hardly avoid the confrontation of such a problem. In the specific case of defining Confucianism, the challenge to Spiro’s approach, therefore, would be how to account for the obscure and controversial notion of “superhuman beings” in the Confucian value system in accordance with his principle of “intra-cultural intuitivity”; the challenge to Saler’s approach, however, is probably how to interpret both the social and historical manifestations of Confucianism with regard to the “central tendencies and peripheries” of religions,³¹⁶ as Saler has discussed in his interpretation of family resemblance and prototype theory.

³¹⁵ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.225.

³¹⁶ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, xiii.

Martin Southwold's 12-attribute-substantiation of a religion

Informed by his fieldwork among Theravada Buddhist villagers in Sri Lanka, Martin Southwold claims that theistic-type definitions and conceptions of religion, such as Durkheim's, are inadequate since they fail to include Theravada Buddhism which is not theistically oriented. To avoid the limitations of these traditional "monothetic" definitions, Southwold suggests rendering religion as "a polythetic class" that allows for theism as a contingent but not necessary attribute of religion. He then presents "a quite tentative and incomplete list of crudely specified attributes," declaring that anything which we would call a religion must have at least some of them.³¹⁷

- (1) A central concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them.
- (2) A dichotomisation of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
- (3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence.
- (4) Ritual practices.
- (5) Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faith.
- (6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
- (7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.
- (8) A mythology.
- (9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
- (10) A priesthood, or similar specialist religious elite.
- (11) Association with a moral community, a church (in Durkheim's sense).
- (12) Association with an ethnic or similar group.

According to Southwold, Theravada Buddhism demonstrates that the first attribute is not necessarily associated with the others since it does not show "a central concern with godlike beings." He believes that "the observed strong associations between the attributes must be due to contingent factors, empirical characteristics of human nature and the nature of cultural and social systems."³¹⁸ By treating the twelve attributes as a polythetic class, Southwold claims, his approach furnishes a fertile perspective in

³¹⁷ Southwold, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," pp.370-371.

³¹⁸ Southwold, "Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," p.371.

suggesting new ways of analyzing known facts about human religious behavior. But the list should not be regarded as either exhaustive or complete in substantiating what is a religion, since, as Southwold has admitted, some other attributes should be added to the list and some of the listed attributes should be specified more precisely. It is evident that Southwold's construction of the twelve attributes is closely based on the conventional understandings of Judaism and Christianity, and extendedly, Islam, in Western societies, because they "remain among the clearest cases, the best examples, of what many anthropologists mean by religion."³¹⁹ It is therefore hardly surprising that all the listed attributes fit "Judaism," "Christianity," and "Islam" perfectly while encountering difficulty in their application to non-Western religions.

Southwold's list provides a pragmatically useful framework to which scholars can conveniently refer in their comparative studies. Although it is not likely that the scholars in the debate on Confucian religiosity have ever been informed by Southwold's approach, his list would certainly bring new insights to surveying the structures and patterns of how arguments are presented in the debate. Take Ren Jiyu, the primary representative of the "Confucian Religion School," for example, his layout of the attributes of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, held by him as substantiations of the "essence" of a true religion, can be better understood with regard to Southwold's list of twelve attributes. If Ren's notion of "religious founder" can not find an obvious spot in Southwold's list, his idea of "school supervisors" as "ministers" certainly can; Ren's "*tian, di, jun, qin, shi*" (heaven, earth, emperor, ancestors, teacher) partially if not totally mirror Southwold's "godlike beings"; Ren's sense of "Confucian canons" is clearly reminiscent of Southwold's idea of

³¹⁹ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.212.

“scriptures”; and several other correspondences.³²⁰ This kind of comparison is, however, neither to endorse Ren Jiyu’s argument in proving Confucianism as “a religion,” nor to verify the truth-value or authority of Southwold’s model of defining religion. Instead, it furnishes a vantage point upon which one can see on the one hand, where the scholars’ attention is focused on and how their arguments are presented in the controversy on Confucian religiosity, and on the other, to what degree Southwold’s list is informative and applicable to the field test of defining Confucianism.

Definability of Confucianism in terms of Religion

The comparability of Confucianism with religions in general and Christianity in particular is, for most of the cases, intuitively conjured, that is, it is neither resulted from nor subject to the theoretical development of the concept of religion per se. Instead, such kind of comparison is usually justified on several non-religious grounds: like the role of Christianity in Western societies, Confucianism has fundamentally shaped every aspect of the traditional Chinese society (a functionalist vision); as a holistic structure, it has given rise to disciplines such as philosophy, ethics, politics, and law that still cast impact on modern Chinese mentality (a historical vision); and more importantly, the discussion of Confucianism with regard to religion creates philosophical, cultural, social, and even existential meanings for contemporary Chinese society (a cultural vision). It should be noted that this non-religious comparability of Confucianism with religions makes the discussion on Confucian religiosity all the more complicated and perplexing.

As has been discussed in Chapter One, the difficulty of defining Confucianism in terms of religion is multi-faceted: linguistic, epistemological, ideological, and etc. If the

³²⁰ Cf. Chapter II of this dissertation, p.98.

linguistic and ideological problems can be primarily attributed to the particularity of the Chinese textuality, the epistemological challenge has to do with the difficulty of transculturing the originally Euro-centric concept of religion into the Chinese vocabulary which is indifferent, if not blind, to the terminology of religion, and with the difficulty of re-conceptualizing Confucianism in accordance with the paradigms and frameworks provided by the Western conception of religion. A solid critique of the definability of Confucianism in the category of religion, therefore, is ultimately if not solely dependent on a legitimate methodological attitude towards transculturing the concept of religion into the Chinese textuality.³²¹

Methodological Attitude towards Transculturing “Religion”

The Western conception of religion, bred by the ontological dualism of Christianity, abounds with irreconcilable dichotomies, among which the confrontation between the cosmology of religious believers and that of scholars has a significant bearing on the approach to the study of religion as an academic discipline. As Jan Platvoet has pointed out, religious believers always see religion from the perspective of “a multiple tier cosmology”: a perceptible and one, or more, non-perceptible ones, with the latter being held as “real” as the former.³²² In the disciplines of anthropology and the study of religion, religious believers as informants provide scholars with data concerning their views on “the meta-empirical tier(s) in their universe, the meta-empirical within this

³²¹ While Andre Droogers has characterized three methodological attitudes in the study of religion: theism, agnosticism, and atheism, Platvoet suggests that a pragmatic approach to religion dictates a methodological agnosticism. See Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.246, 305.

³²² Platvoet, “The Definers Defined,” p.184.

world, and their conduct of life in consequence of an ineluctable relation with it”;³²³ hence the axiomatically held *emic* perspective. In contrast, scholars can examine religion only from the viewpoint of “a one-tier cosmology,” that of the perceptible world, because both anthropology and the study of religion can only be conducted in an empirical way. This approach is called the non-axiomatic *etic* perspective.³²⁴

Corresponding to the difference between *emic* and *etic* perspectives is the dichotomy of “natural class” versus “technical class” concepts in anthropology and in the study of religion, as many scholars have maintained. While the “natural class” concepts are regarded as imposing themselves on the insiders (both believers and scholars within the native system), the “technical class” concepts are generally viewed as being stipulated by scholars for academic purposes.³²⁵ When the prototypical term of religion serves as a label for referring to specific cultural complexes in modern Western societies, it is regarded as a “natural class” concept, which due to its “natural” nature might comprise a wide set of denotative and connotative meanings of the multi-stranded kind; when it is employed by scholars to construct specific cultural phenomena in other societies as their “religion” or “religions,” it can be regarded as belonging to the “technical class.” Platvoet calls the process of applying “natural class” concepts from Western societies to certain cultural complexes in other societies “an *etic* procedure.”³²⁶ Since most non-Western societies have no term and concept equivalent to the Western concept of religion, the cross-cultural application of “religion” is therefore seen as “an *etic* procedure” in the

³²³ Platvoet, “The Definers Defined,” p.184.

³²⁴ *Emic* and *etic* can also be called the “actor perspective” and the “observer perspective,” respectively. See Platvoet, “The Definers Defined,” p.198n11; Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.256n14.

³²⁵ See Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.501; J. A. M. Snoek, *Initiation: A Methodological Approach to the Application of Classification and Definition Theory in the Study of Rituals* (Pijnacker: Dutch Efficiency Bureau, 1987), pp.36-37.

³²⁶ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.501.

sense that by using the term Western scholars establish that other societies and cultures also have “a religion” or “religions.”

It can be easily argued that Platvoet’s differentiation of natural class and technical class concepts is very important to understanding how a prototypical term from a native cultural system can, when well stipulated, assume analytical functions in its application to cultural complexes in other societies. However, Platvoet’s claim of religion “as both a natural class concept to refer to religions in Western societies, and as a technical class concept to refer to ‘religions’ in...non-Western societies”³²⁷ seems too clear-cut to address the complexity of the “*etic* procedure,” which, I would rather believe, can happen both intra-culturally and cross-culturally. When Western scholars use originally prototypical, pre-reflective concepts of their own cultural system to analyze certain cultural complexes of their own societies, they are actually engaged in “an *etic* procedure” because these folk categories need to be stipulated and defined to a certain degree before they can be used heuristically, analytically, and theoretically, the scholarly effort to define religion in the Western academia being a vivid example of this. By the same token, scholars in non-Western societies can also engage in such a procedure when they employ the natural class concepts of their own vocabulary to analyze the cultural phenomena either of their own societies or of Western societies. The key variable in this process, therefore, is the “cross-paradigmatic”³²⁸ rather than the “cross-cultural” transformation of concepts, as Platvoet maintains. In other words, the principle of objectivity in scientific research requires that scholars paradigmatically distance themselves from the cultural complexes that are to be studied, be they of their own

³²⁷ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.502.

³²⁸ This is my own term and is subject to critique.

societies or of other societies, by switching from the actor's perspective to the observer's perspective,

When Chinese scholars employ the Western term of religion to conceptualize Confucianism, they need to conduct both a cross-cultural critique of "religion" (*zongjiao*) and a cross-paradigmatic critique of the natural class concepts, i.e., the terms of *rujiao*, *rujia*, *ruxue*, which they use to designate the cultural domain called "Confucianism." The extreme disruption of the Confucian tradition in the 20th century has deprived Chinese scholars the status of "actors," and thus dictates that they adopt the observer's perspective in the discussion on Confucian religiosity.³²⁹ This also means that the natural class terms of *rujiao*, *rujia*, *ruxue*, and probably some others, have to go through "an *etic* procedure" in which they are transformed, by stipulation or definition, from folk, prototypical, and pre-reflective terms to technical class concepts that can be used heuristically, analytically, and theoretically in academic discussion. The linguistic or terminological ambiguity in the controversy on Confucian religiosity can be ultimately attributed to the lack of this cross-paradigmatic critique. The "natural" nature of the words of *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue* determines that, without such a cross-paradigmatic critique, the contest over their usage in the controversy on Confucian religiosity can only be conducted in strategic, ideological, and rhetorical terms.³³⁰

³²⁹ Although an increasing number of scholars have started to cultivate intellectual affiliation with Confucianism, their paradigms, frameworks, and even vocabularies remain predominantly Western.

³³⁰ Few scholars have so far recognized the necessity of conducting such a cross-paradigmatic critique, with He Guanghu as possibly the only exception. In his effort to prove Confucianism (*rujiao*) as "a religion," He stipulates *rujiao* as such that it "is not used to refer to the totality of *ruxue* or *rujia*, but rather the Chinese aboriginal religion which originated during the Shang-Zhou periods and which has lasted for three thousand years; it is a religious system that takes the belief in Heaven as its core... Confucians as its social foundation, pertinent contents in *ruxue* as its theoretical construction." See He Guanghu, "Zhongguo Wenhua de Gen yu Hua: Tan Ruxue de Fanben yu Kaixin," *Yuandao*, no.2.

The cross-cultural critique of the concept of religion or *zongjiao* in the discussion on Confucian religiosity also involves, though implicitly, a cross-paradigmatic critique in a certain sense. It is not only important to investigate the etymology of *zongjiao*, the original meanings of “religion” in Western languages, and how it has adapted to the Chinese vocabulary, but also necessary to examine the “paradigm shift” of the concept of religion that is intrinsically embodied in its cross-cultural transformation. In the Western textuality, the term of religion serves as both a natural class concept (prototypical, pre-reflective) in daily life, and as a technical class concept (heuristic, analytical, theoretical) in academic discussion. In the Chinese textuality, however, it is not unreasonable to speculate that, when the term of religion was transformed into the Chinese vocabulary as *zongjiao*, its “natural” nature had been lost in the translation, since, as has been discussed in Chapter One, it was first used specifically to designate Christianity.³³¹ It is therefore the “technical” nature of the term that is retained in the Chinese vocabulary, by which religion is generally understood as “a form of social ideology and a cultural and socio-historical phenomenon.”³³² This “paradigm shift” explains the departure of the sense of “religion” from the sense of “a religion” in the Chinese term of *zongjiao*.³³³ For the same reason, the word “religious” as the adjective form of “religion” corresponds to no word in the Chinese vocabulary.³³⁴

In the specific case of defining Confucian religiosity, the problem of conceptualizing religion cannot be merely resolved in a cross-paradigmatic critique or a cross-cultural

³³¹ Cf. Chapter I of this dissertation, pp.14-19.

³³² *Zongjiao Dacidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Religion) (Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1998), p.1.

³³³ For example, the casual expression “football (or whatever) is my religion” in English never finds its equivalent in the Chinese language.

³³⁴ The closest word in Chinese that can be used as the equivalent of “religious” is *qiancheng*, which, however, conjures a sense of piety rather than religiosity or transcendence.

(Sino-West) critique, or both. Since, as has been discussed in above, the term of religion (*zongjiao*) manifests a “technical” nature and attains analytical functions in both Western and Chinese textualities, the problem should be dealt with in a “universal” rather than a “Chinese” perspective, “universal” in the sense that it is a common challenge facing all scholars in the world, particularly anthropologists and religious studies scholars. In other words, it is essentially an empirical or anthropological problem, as demonstrated in the pragmatic turn in defining religion during the second half of the 20th century. The “particularity” of the Chinese conceptualization of religion, therefore, is to be observed with regard to the fact that Chinese scholars generally lag behind in this initiative due to inadequate translation of Western works in this field and the underdevelopment of anthropological field work. As a consequence, the difference between Chinese and Western conceptualizations of religion is actually “practical” rather than “cultural” or “paradigmatic.” The difficulties that Chinese scholars encounter in their discussion on Confucian religiosity, henceforth, have to be investigated with respect to both the universality of the problem in defining religion and the particularity of presenting the question in the Chinese textuality.

Unlike the cross-cultural transformation of the concept of religion, which retains its “technical” nature in both Chinese and Western languages, the term of Confucianism as a Jesuit construct has attained a unique nature in Western languages, a nature that fairly distinguishes it from “religion” on the “technical” ground, and from *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue* on the “natural” ground. In contrast to the “untidy” or “spontaneous” nature of *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue*, the term of Confucianism is affiliated with a holistic and panoramic vision due to its metonymic function imposed by the Jesuits, hence the relative

“tidiness” of the discourse “Is Confucianism a religion?” in the Western textuality.³³⁵ This is not to say, however, that the cross-cultural construct of “Confucianism” has gone through “an *etic* procedure” and has assumed a “technical” nature in the discussion on Confucian religiosity in the Western textuality. On the contrary, when the Jesuits first created the word as a metonym to refer to “anything Chinese,”³³⁶ it was actually engaged in a prototypical, pre-reflective usage because it was not used as an analytical tool to conduct academic research, but rather employed to convey general information about Chinese culture for the European public. As far as I am concerned, this folk usage of “Confucianism” so far has not yet been thoroughly examined and has created confusions and misperceptions in the Western scholarship of Confucianism. In order to obtain a “technical” nature and thus to serve as an analytical category in the discussion on Confucian religiosity, the term of Confucianism needs to be stipulated and defined in the Western textuality, just as much as the terms of *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue* should be in the Chinese textuality. The difference between the vision of “Confucianism” and that of *rujiao*, *rujia*, and *ruxue*, therefore, can only be accounted for with regard to an inspection of how the religious dimension of Confucianism is imagined and conceptualized by the use of these terms.

Religious Dimensions of the Traditional Chinese Society

As has been discussed earlier, the epistemological problems facing the debate on Confucian religiosity can be attributed to both the difficulty of defining religion and the difficulty of demarcating Confucianism from the broader context of the traditional

³³⁵ Cf. Chapter I of this dissertation, pp.26-31.

³³⁶ Lionel Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp.4, 117.

Chinese society. The validity and applicability of any definition of religion needs to be tested with regard to both the plurality and diversity of world religions and the historicity and particularity of a cultural system that is to be studied. In the specific case of defining Confucianism, the epistemological significance should be evaluated on two grounds: first, by so doing how much meaning can be attained in understanding Confucianism as a manifestation of Chinese culture; and second, to what degree it can contribute to the understanding of religion as a phenomenon in human history. The attempt to demarcate Confucianism from the broader context of the traditional Chinese society, on the other hand, should take into account the philosophical, ethical, political, legal, socio-structural, and many other “secular” manifestations that can be closely associated with the category called Confucianism. It also involves a question about how much of the religious expression of the traditional Chinese society, which has been contested by all kinds of doctrines, beliefs, rituals, shrines, temples, etc., can be identified as belonging to the domain of Confucianism.³³⁷

The conventional but increasingly challenged approach to Chinese religiosity is to imagine it in association with “sectarian factors” modeled after Western religions, as has been suggested by Laurence Thompson and Jordan Paper.³³⁸ It is a common scene that Westerners interested in Chinese religion(s) are instantly attracted to the doctrines, institutions, and histories of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, or the so-called “three religions.”³³⁹ The attempt to understand Chinese religion as several systems of

³³⁷ The conventional way to describe the religious dimensions of the traditional Chinese society is to refer to the institutional traditions of Buddhism, Taoism, the folk religion, and controversially, Confucianism.

³³⁸ See Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1979), 3rd edition; Jordan Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

³³⁹ See W.E. Soothill, *The Three Religions of China* (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1913).

doctrine, according to Thompson, is to read Western experience into a quite different set of circumstances, because “lay people did not usually belong to an institutionalized sect, nor did their religious life have anything to do with signing articles of faith.”³⁴⁰ Paper traces this “misconception” of Chinese religion to Matteo Ricci, who, he believes, in order to promote Christianity, reinterpreted *sanjiao* (three doctrines, i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) as “three sects” and insisted that the *literati* only adhered to the Confucian sect and would never “belong to any other sect.”³⁴¹ The consequence of Ricci’s misrepresentation of Chinese religion is extremely significant, Paper contends, because it “became a religious studies dogma, persisting to this day.” Paper thus asserts:

It is still difficult for most Western historians of religion to understand that religion in China is a single complex of considerable antiquity, held together by the practice of frequent ritual offerings of elaborate meals to departed members of the family and to nature spirits, and embellished by many related subsidiary practices, including fertility rituals and rituals of social bonding.³⁴²

Both Thompson and Paper use the word “religion” in the singular to convey the interpretation of Chinese religious expression as a manifestation of the Chinese culture. Their concept of religion pinpoints the “singular” and “homogeneous” nature of Chinese religious behavior, because, as Paper puts it, “the basic religious practices of all Chinese are essentially the same.”³⁴³ Correspondingly, both of them practically exclude all “foreign” religions, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, etc., from their denomination of “Chinese religion,” with the exception of Buddhism, since it “succeeded in naturalizing itself in China” and “was largely accommodated to” the ingrained world views of the Chinese population.³⁴⁴ In defiance of Robert Redfield’s cultural dichotomy of “great

³⁴⁰ Thompson, *Chinese Religion*, p.2.

³⁴¹ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.11.

³⁴² Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.12.

³⁴³ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.14.

³⁴⁴ Thompson, *Chinese Religion*, pp.1-2.

tradition” and “little tradition,” Paper insists on understanding Chinese religion as “a continuum,” by which he refers to the religious behavior of “a middle class composed of government clerks, professionals, merchants, and farmers of moderate circumstances.”³⁴⁵ Since the religious behavior of this “middle class” is characterized by their concentration on ritual—“an essential feature of Chinese culture,” Paper asserts, “Chinese religion is best studied through an examination of ritual patterns.”³⁴⁶ He therefore believes that, by focusing on ritual rather than belief, or behavior rather than ideology, his approach “presupposes a particular perspective for the definition and understanding of religious phenomena, and... implies a distinct theory of religion as a fully embedded cultural system.”³⁴⁷

The significance of both Thompson and Paper’s approach to Chinese religion can be understood in two dimensions: by interpreting religion as an integral part of the cultural system, it articulates the particularity of Chinese religious life which would otherwise be neglected or misrepresented; by confronting the presupposed paradigms and perspectives of Western scholars, their approach also furnishes an understanding of religion that addresses the plurality and variety of human experience. However, it would certainly be mistaken to argue that Thompson and Paper have given ultimate legitimacy to their interpretation of Chinese religion at the expense of alternatives. In any case, the vitality of their approach is dependent on the accumulated understanding of Chinese religion that has been achieved by multiple approaches. As Paper has admitted, his concentration on “continuum” is intended to serve as “a third-stage approach” to “reject both a priori

³⁴⁵ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.24.

³⁴⁶ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.26.

³⁴⁷ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.25.

bifurcations as well as synthetic entities that mediate them.”³⁴⁸ “To reject” in this case is to be understood as “to transcend” instead of “to negate,” much less “to illegitimize,” because the interpretation of Chinese religious experience in the Western category of religion is engaged in a constant process of reconstruction and hence needs to be subjected to critique of multiple perspectives. In other words, Paper’s approach is to articulate, deepen, and enrich the understanding of Chinese religion by focusing on “symbols and rituals” without isolating “religious institutions.” The question of demarcating Confucianism from the broader cultural context of the traditional Chinese society, in a certain sense, is to address its significance as an institution and therefore must be rendered in accordance with this perspective.

It is evident that Chinese religion(s), like many other non-Western religions, cannot be studied apart from their contexts, nor in isolation from their “secular” functions, political, ethical, legal, socio-structural, psychological, etc. As Jan Platvoet has pointed out, the academic discipline of religious studies has established that there is no definite institutional separation and demarcation between the religious and non-religious spheres in many non-Western societies, both diachronically and synchronically.³⁴⁹ It is a general case that in non-Western societies religion intermingles with non-religious elements, and therefore assumes an obscure and often controversial visibility for anthropologists and religious studies scholars. As a consequence, the attempt to study religion in these non-Western societies should be engaged in close association with other social dimensions, such as kinship, modes of production, the social and political order of a society, or peace and prosperity.

³⁴⁸ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.25.

³⁴⁹ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.250.

The religious dimensions of the traditional Chinese society, therefore, need to be studied as integral components of Chinese religious expression in spite of the contested claims of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. The dichotomy between “great tradition” and “little tradition” in Robert Redfield’s sense,³⁵⁰ or between “institutional religion” and “diffused religion” in C. K. Yang’s sense,³⁵¹ or between “doctrinal religion” and “community religion” in Jan Platvoet’s sense,³⁵² has to be transcended in this cohesive approach. However, the variety and obscurity of Chinese religious expression make the task of drawing a clear picture of Chinese religion in general, and of demarcating Confucianism in particular, infinitely difficult. If the variety can be explained in terms of the multiple frameworks of religious expression provided by both institutional and popular traditions, the obscurity has to be attributed to “the lack of structural prominence of a formally organized religious system in the institutional framework of Chinese society.”³⁵³ A pragmatic and expedient way to confront this difficulty, henceforth, is to appeal to the referential frameworks of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc., without, of course, drawing definite boundaries between them and between religious and non-religious expressions.

Contrary to a long-held claim finalized by the May Fourth intellectuals that Chinese people are rationalistic or agnostic, a close examination of the traditional Chinese society could easily tell a different story. C. K. Yang has fairly argued that “religion penetrates the concepts and structure of every social institution” of the traditional society: at the

³⁵⁰ Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp.67-104.

³⁵¹ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), pp.294-295.

³⁵² Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.487-494.

³⁵³ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.20.

personal level, astrology, chronomancy, and numerous other forms of magic and animism profoundly influence an average person's outlook on life and his/her workday routine activities; at the social level, the strong influence of religion is manifest in the numerous temples and shrines which dot the entire landscape of China.³⁵⁴ The religious expression of the traditional Chinese society is simply too profound and too complicated to sort out clear threads and features alongside the frameworks of the institutional traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism. The effort to demarcate Confucianism from the broader context, therefore, should be restrained from a hasty conclusion about what these institutions are, what they include or exclude. Hence, I propose "a minimum definition," in historical and sociological senses, of these institutions so as to leave the obscure and controversial boundary problems to detailed discussion. By "a minimum definition," Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are understood as referring to particular spectra of the traditional Chinese society that consist of canons or classics (*Four Books & Five Classics*, Buddhist sutras, Taoist canons), a special group of personnel (Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks and nuns, Taoist priests), and institutional infrastructures (the Confucian academies and examination system, Buddhist and Taoist temples, etc.).

Apart from the canonical religious dimensions that are embodied in the three institutional traditions, Chinese religious expression is also manifest in every corner of the social fabric, though in a much diffused, intermingled, and spontaneous fashion. Usually associated with the names of "folk religion," "classical religion," or "popular

³⁵⁴ C. K. Yang, "The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.270.

religion,³⁵⁵ this religious dimension is felt more intimately and observed more faithfully by the mass population. The leading characteristic of this religious dimension is the recognition of a spiritual “world” that coexists alongside the world of immediate experience, a spiritual world that consists of gods, ghosts, bodhisattvas, spiritual beings, and semi-divine sages. The first strand of this religious manifestation is the hierarchy of spiritual beings that resembles the earthly bureaucracy of rulers and officials, conjuring a sense of how the universe is governed by the celestial bureaus. Thus from the very bottom to the very top, we have the graded level of authority: Zao Jun (the Stove God), Tudi Gong (the Earth God), Cheng Huang (God of the City Wall and Moat), the deified figures of the official state cult (Confucius, Laozi, Guan Gong, etc.), Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and finally, Yuhuang Dadi (the Jade Emperor).

The second strand of the religious manifestation of the mass population consists of various deities that represent earthly values, notably, wealth, loyalty, and happiness. These deities include spirits that symbolize the powers of nature, such as mountains and rivers, as well as patron gods of various professions, such as actors, barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and even Confucian scholars. The next strand of spiritual beings is composed of semi-divine figures who are transformed from historical persons due to their ritual function or spiritual accomplishments, including the emperor and his officials because of their sacred status, certain Buddhist monks revered as living Buddhas, Taoist recluses regarded as Immortals. The fourth category of spiritual beings are various spirits of ancestors, as exemplified in the practice of ancestral worship, one of the principal rituals in the traditional Chinese society. Apart from all the above-mentioned deities or spiritual

³⁵⁵ See Christian Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1986); C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*; Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

beings, there is also a special group of religious professionals (in addition to Buddhist monks and nuns and Taoist priests) who serve as mediums between the divine world and the human world, including astrologers, geomancers, diviners, and so forth. And finally, there have also existed sectarian groups demanding affiliation in the traditional Chinese society, who, by drawing elements from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, offer their members simplified rituals and scriptures as well as the opportunity to meet for congregational-style worship.³⁵⁶

Demarcating Confucianism from the Cultural Context

Consensus holds that the distinctions between the three institutional traditions, i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and the distinctions between them and the folk religion are not observed at the popular level of the traditional Chinese society. Only at the elite level of the three traditions does there exist some sort of division, in the sense that it is only Confucian scholars, Buddhist monks and nuns, and Taoist priests that can be openly identified as Confucians, Buddhists, and Taoists.³⁵⁷ As a result, the meaning and significance of Chinese religion cannot be properly understood unless due attention is paid to the interrelations rather than distinctions between the different dimensions of Chinese religious life. However, if the study of Chinese religion can only make sense when the Chinese religious life is approached as an “continuum,” as both Paper and Jochim have clearly maintained, one cannot help but ask: why bother to demarcate Confucianism (or, similarly, Buddhism, Taoism) from the broader cultural context of the Chinese society? It is apparent that this interrogation might cast serious doubt on the

³⁵⁶ The above description of popular religion in the traditional Chinese society relies heavily on Christian Jochim’s account of “folk religion.” See Jochim, *Chinese Religions*, pp.12-15.

³⁵⁷ Jochim, *Chinese religions*, p.15.

legitimacy of the discussion on Confucian religiosity, let alone the bare question of whether Confucianism is a religion; even more specifically, it confronts the whole point of conducting the current dissertation research. Therefore, should the question not be adequately addressed, not only the debate on Confucian religiosity will be deprived of any epistemological significance, the current dissertation itself will also be dismissed with no hesitation.

The actual situation is, however, much more complicated than it seems. Had the discussion on Confucian religiosity been just an epistemological issue, the above-mentioned interrogation would have made a perfect point. The stake is, the question of whether Confucianism is a religion was not presented in terms of epistemology in the first place; and it has carried too much baggage with it throughout history. To face up to the challenge posed by the “continuum” approach, such as Paper’s and Jochim’s, one has to stretch far beyond the scope of religious studies or of anthropology. As has been discussed in Chapter I, the controversy on Confucian religiosity has less to do with either religious studies or philosophy than with the cultural and socio-political concerns of modern Chinese intellectuals.³⁵⁸ The effort and counter-effort to define Confucianism in the Western category of religion have been inextricably woven into the big picture of how Chinese intellectuals interpret their tradition and modernity in post-Confucian paradigms. The epistemological significance of the controversy on Confucian religiosity can only be recognized with regard to its historicity. To demarcate Confucianism from the broader context of the Chinese society, therefore, makes it possible to interpret the

³⁵⁸ Cf. Chapter I of this dissertation, pp.49-59. It is interesting to note that, while the debate involves Chinese scholars mainly from the fields of philosophy and religious studies, it draws primary attention from anthropologists and religious studies scholars in the West.

controversy as an integral part of the Chinese engagement of cultural and socio-political reconstruction in accordance with the spirit of modernity.

It has been widely agreed that Confucianism has played a dominant role in shaping the traditional Chinese society by penetrating every corner of the social structure, and modern scholars are inclined to perceive it as a “seamless” entity in which philosophical, ethical, legal, political, and possibly religious meanings are cohesively incorporated. To distinguish Confucianism from its broader context, one needs to take into account its social, historical, and existential manifestations, both diachronically and synchronically. In any case, the scholar should not be compelled by the “omnipresence” nature of Confucianism so as to imagine it as an institution with clear-cut boundaries or definite stratifications. The sense of “continuum” that characterizes the religious life of the Chinese society, as discussed by Paper and Jochim, suggests that Confucianism can be regarded as a “fuzzy set”³⁵⁹ in the sense that its concepts, values, precepts, and norms are manifested in social dimensions in a graded fashion. That is to say, some dimensions of the Chinese society may be regarded as very Confucian, whereas some others may be less so. The notion of fuzzy sets, therefore, transforms the boundary problems of demarcating Confucianism into questions about its central tendencies and peripheries. In other words, it enables scholars to focus their attention on the primary features and characteristics that can be openly identified as Confucian without drawing a hard and fast line between the Confucian and the non-Confucian.

³⁵⁹ The concept of fuzzy sets was defined by L. A. Zadeh as such: a fuzzy set is a class of objects with a continuum of grades of membership...[it] is characterized by a membership (characteristic) function which assigns to each object a grade of membership ranging between zero and one. See L. A. Zadeh, 1965, “Fuzzy Sets,” in *Information and Control* 8: 338-353.

The way the question on Confucian religiosity has so far been presented in both Chinese and Western textualities, i.e., the focus on the conception of “a religion” instead of “religion,” reveals that Confucianism is presumably perceived as a social, historical institution, a system with philosophical, ethical, political, legal, and other implications. This presupposition commands a thorough investigation of both the inner and external, or, the “metaphysical” and “physical” (institutional) dimensions of Confucianism. In particular, the discussion on Confucian religiosity should take into account at least the following aspects: the question of Confucius’ agnosticism; the concepts of Heaven, predetermination, divination, and the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements; the relationship between Confucianism and the state cult, ancestor worship, and other forms of religious practices.³⁶⁰ To rely on a “one-dimensional” approach to the question on Confucian religiosity, i.e., the “metaphysical” approach, scholars can advance their argumentation in either direction without much validity. For example, a non-religious interpretation of Confucianism can easily make its point by arguing that “Confucianism set up no god as the premise of its teachings, and its basic principles were developed mainly from pragmatic considerations.”³⁶¹ On the other hand, a religious approach to Confucianism can equally defend its position by reading into the Confucian system the “ideas of Heaven and fate as an answer to human problems unaccountable for by knowledge or in moral terms.”³⁶² By the same token, Confucius’ attitude towards ghosts and spirits can be interpreted as either theistic, or agnostic, or even atheistic, depending

³⁶⁰ C. K. Yang, “The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion,” p. 271.

³⁶¹ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.26.

³⁶² C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.26.

on which of the Confucian classics are given primary importance by the interpreter.³⁶³

This problem of interpretation clearly demonstrates the methodological limitation of the one-dimensional, metaphysical approach to Confucian religiosity, and therefore is unable to address, let alone to dismantle, the complexity of the controversy on defining Confucianism.

As for the “physical” or institutional approach to Confucian religiosity, much of the difficulty centers on how to interpret the cross territories between Confucianism and the folk religion or classical religion, as can be seen in both C. K. Yang’s and Christian Jochim’s account on their relationship. By appealing to an ostensive definition of religion inspired by Joachim Wach and Paul Tillich, Yang interprets Confucianism as “a sociopolitical doctrine having religious qualities,”³⁶⁴ and, correspondingly, draws a practical line between Confucianism and the classical religion, even though he is quite aware of their close affiliation. The immediate benefit of Yang’s approach is that he avoids the dilemma of whether to incorporate religious practices with ambiguous origins, such as the worship of Heaven and the worship of ancestors, into the system of Confucianism. The limitation of his approach, however, is that he could barely go beyond a “functional” interpretation of the relationship between Confucianism and the classical religion, by which he perceives some of the principal religious practices in the Chinese society as “supernatural sanctions” of Confucian values.³⁶⁵

³⁶³ The Fives Classics, which Confucius used to teach his disciples, retain strongly theistic traces, whereas the Four Books, allegedly compiled by Confucius’ disciples, assume a rather agnostic outlook.

³⁶⁴ C. K. Yang defines religion as “the system of beliefs, ritualistic practices, and organizational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life.” See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp.1, 26.

³⁶⁵ For example, see the very title of Yang’s article, “The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion.”

Unlike C. K. Yang who restrains from sanctioning a clear-cut demarcation between Confucianism and other institutions, Jochim assigns all the religious practices that cannot be openly identified as Confucian, Buddhist, or Taoist to the category of folk religion. He categorizes Confucianism as “great tradition” and the folk religion as “little tradition,” and adopts a mixed attitude towards the contested religious practices that stretch across both territories.³⁶⁶ For instance, he regards the Mandate of Heaven as a central notion of Confucianism but refrains from discussing the worship of Heaven, which, I would guess, might belong to his category of “little tradition” and thus compromise his premises. Meanwhile, he designates controversial practices, such as the worship of ancestors, the worship of Confucius, and the worship of patron deities by Confucian scholars to the category of folk religion. These practices are controversial precisely because it is a contested issue whether to incorporate them into a certain system or another. Jochim’s approach is practically useful as long as he is aware of the specificity and provisionality of his demarcation of Confucianism and of other religious institutions. But the validity of his approach will still be severely questioned if the relationship between Confucianism and the controversial religious practices is not adequately addressed. To a large degree, the methodological problems in both Yang’s and Jochim’s approaches exemplify the difficulty of demarcating Confucianism from the broader cultural context of the traditional Chinese society, difficulty that has greatly complicated the discussion on Confucian religiosity.

From the above survey of both Yang’s and Jochim’s approaches, it can be said that the debate on Confucian religiosity is largely conditioned by how Confucianism is demarcated from and conceptualized with regard to the broader cultural context of the

³⁶⁶ Jochim, *Chinese Religions*, pp.5-16.

traditional Chinese society. Whether to incorporate certain religious practices, such as the worship of Heaven, the worship of Confucius, the ancestor worship, and the worship of patron deities by Confucian scholars, into the category of Confucianism, could result in diametrically different conclusions on Confucian religiosity. This complication is all the more discernible in the Chinese textuality, since the terms that are used to designate Confucianism, i.e., *rujiao*, *rujia*, *ruxue*, have already encoded in their semantics certain information pointing to different directions.³⁶⁷

C. K. Yang has attributed the “frequent treatment of Confucianism as a religion in Western literature” to the “functional approach” of Western scholars, since, as he argues, Confucianism has played a dominant role in furnishing moral values to Chinese society.³⁶⁸ I find this argument far from convincing, not as much because Yang might have exaggerated the role of functional approach in the Western conceptualization of religion as because he has looked in a wrong direction. The reason that Confucianism is more likely to be treated as a religion in the West, among many other factors, can be largely attributed to the linguistic structure of the question in the Western signifying process. In other words, the question in the Western textuality is likely to be dictated by the holistic and panoramic vision of the term “Confucianism,” which in turn sanctions an inclusive attitude towards the demarcation of Confucianism. As a consequence, Chinese religious practices with ambiguous nature are more likely to be incorporated into the category of Confucianism, which is a Jesuit construct in the first place, and which is constantly informed by how Christianity is understood in the West.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Chapter I of this dissertation, pp.34-41.

³⁶⁸ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.26.

Definability of Confucianism in terms of Religion

Confucianism has provided the traditional Chinese society with structural principles and operational values for the basic institutions from the family to the state. Although it has never functioned as a religious institution the way Buddhism and Taoism have, no one can deny the presence of religious qualities either in its theoretical system or in its institutional establishments. C. K. Yang believes that “Confucianism adopted many religious elements that helped it to function effectively in the traditional social milieu,” because it was “born of a superstition-ridden period and institutionalized in a society where religion was a pervasive influence.”³⁶⁹ Moreover, in response to the challenge of Buddhism and Taoism, Confucianism in its new form of Neo-Confucianism since the Song times has imported much of the Buddhist vision to enrich and strengthen its theoretical system.³⁷⁰ Although such Buddhist influence was of a metaphysical and philosophical orientation, it did bring new dimension of religious nature to the theoretical establishment of Confucianism. The contest over defining Confucianism in the category of religion, therefore, is not about categorizing it as “religious” or “non-religious” (few will doubt its religious nature), but rather about whether the presence of its religious qualities has cumulated to the degree that it can be regarded as on a par with Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any other religions.

The religious nature of Confucian metaphysics is first of all manifest in its treatment of the ultimate meaning of life and death, though such an issue is addressed in terms of moral responsibility to people, not to any supernatural power. Confucius’ attitude towards this question, as illustrated in the *Analects*, is one of the most contested areas

³⁶⁹ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp.244-245.

³⁷⁰ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.245.

about the interpretation of Confucian religiosity. Many modern scholars have repeatedly employed statements in the *Analects* to establish the agnostic nature of Confucianism and to divest it of any supernatural concepts.³⁷¹ However, there are an increasing number of scholars who tend to interpret the same statements alternatively. For example, of the statement “the subjects on which the Master did not talk were *guai li luan shen*,” the phrase *guai li luan shen* can be interpreted either as “extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings” (James Legge), or as “extraordinary forces and disturbing spirits” (C. K. Yang), making the controversy on Confucian religiosity all the more complicated.

It should be noted that, while the “agnostic” statements by Confucius give priority to this-worldly matters, they do not disprove the existence of supernatural forces. Since, as has been indicated by many historical surveys, supernatural conceptions loomed large in people’s minds during Confucius’ time, it is not likely that Confucius himself can have escaped entirely the concern for the supernatural. C. K. Yang has rightly suggested that “Confucius carefully kept the supernatural alive in the background in his admonition to ‘respect the spiritual beings,’ in his emphasis on sacrificial ceremonies, in his attitude toward Heaven and fate.”³⁷² More importantly, even if it can be established that Confucius approached the ideas of gods and spirits agnostically, his position was far from becoming a prevailing attitude during his time and afterwards. What Confucius actually said or meant, therefore, cannot be taken as the exact manifestation of the intellectual

³⁷¹ These statements of the *Analects* include: “The Master did not talk about extraordinary forces and disturbing spirits” (VII, 20); “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?... While you do not know life, how can you know about death?” (XI, 11); “To give one’s self earnestly to the duties due to men, and, while, respecting spiritual beings, to keep aloof [at a distance] from them, may be called wisdom” (VI, 20).

³⁷² C. K. Yang, “The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion,” p.272.

outlook of Confucianism in general. It is true that Confucian scholars occasionally rose with a thoroughly agnostic view in the course of history,³⁷³ but they were not able to dislodge the influence of religious qualities from the Confucian metaphysics.

The religious nature of Confucianism is more discernible in its interpretation of the ideas of Heaven and fate as an answer to human problems which cannot be accounted for by knowledge or in moral terms. There is a general agreement that, in the pre-Confucian period, Heaven was regarded as a personified supreme force, dictating the events of nature and human society, wielding the power of reward and punishment.³⁷⁴ Despite the secularizing process during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods, the tendency to identify Heaven as an impersonal, natural, and self-operating force did not exert significant influence on the Confucian worldviews in general. Even Confucius himself retained the supernatural, personified notion of Heaven to some extent. In several passages of the *Analects*, Confucius repeatedly attributed to Heaven the misfortunes of his time and the failure of his personal career, such as “Heaven produced the virtue that is in me; what can Huan T’ui do to me?”³⁷⁵ and “Alas, Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!”³⁷⁶

Closely affiliated with the supernatural notion of Heaven is the belief in fate (*ming*), as addressed by Confucius, Mencius, and subsequent Confucian thinkers. One of the most frequently quoted sayings comes from the *Analects*, “Death and life have their fate; riches and honor depend upon Heaven.”³⁷⁷ In another passage of the *Analects*, Confucius

³⁷³ See Hu Shih, “What I Believe: Autobiography,” *Forum* (Jan.-Feb., 1931), vol.85, p.42.

³⁷⁴ Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, tr. Derk Bodde (Princeton, N.J., 1952), vol. I, chap. iii.

³⁷⁵ *Analects*, VII, 22, as given in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

³⁷⁶ *Analects*, XI, 8.

³⁷⁷ *Analects*, XII, 5.

is said to have asserted, “If my principles are to advance, it is fate. If they are to fall to the ground, it is fate.”³⁷⁸ The religious thought of Confucius was inherited and developed by Mencius, who rendered the notions of Heaven and fate in a more frequent and explicit fashion. For instance, Mencius is believed to have stated, “To advance a man or to stop his advance is really beyond the power of other men. My not finding in the prince of Lu a ruler who would confide in me, and put my counsels into practice, is from Heaven.”³⁷⁹ Another passage from Mencius tells the same idea, “But Heaven does not yet wish that the empire should enjoy tranquility and good order. If it wished this, who is there besides me to bring it about? How should I be otherwise than dissatisfied?”³⁸⁰

As an important sequel to the supernatural notions of Heaven and fate, the theory of Yin (negative)-Yang (positive) and the Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) occupies a significant place in the religious thinking of Confucianism. The application of this theory to the study and interpretation of the Five Classics by Confucian scholars culminated during the Han period, as exemplified in Dong Zhongshu’s book *Chunqiu Fanlu* (“Heavy Dew of Spring and Autumn”). The theory developed after the Han period centered on the supernatural theme of “interaction between Heaven and man” (*tian ren gan ying*).³⁸¹ This notion holds that human being’s deeds may anger or please Heaven, and Heaven metes out punishment or reward accordingly. By assigning moral significance to each of the factors of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements, therefore, it

³⁷⁸ *Analects*, XIII, 38.

³⁷⁹ *Mengzi* (“Works of Mencius”), I, 16.

³⁸⁰ *Mengzi*, II, 13.

³⁸¹ Dong Zhongshu, *Chunqiu Fanlu* (“Heavy Dew of Spring and Autumn”).

was possible for the Confucians to work up a frame of reference by which to interpret the intentions behind the phenomena of the supernatural forces.³⁸²

The institutional manifestation of the religious nature of Confucianism can be investigated with regard to the sacrificial rituals that are performed in all the major religious practices that do not explicitly belong to Buddhism and Taoism, namely, the worship of Heaven, the worship of ancestors, the worship of Confucius, etc. As the cultic aspect of the classical religion, these sacrificial rituals give supernatural sanctions to Confucian structural principles and ethical values.³⁸³ Jordan Paper has noticed that traditional Chinese scholars, at least since Xunzi (a.325-238 BCE), could consider a major object of religious ritual to be maintenance of the social fabric itself.³⁸⁴ For example, the state cult of Heaven worship gives approval and support to Confucian values that define the moral and social connotations of political power. The worship of ancestors, again, does not create a system of kinship ethics from its supernatural premises, but rather provides support to the Confucian values designed for the kinship group. Sacrificial rituals are generally believed to have commanded both secular and religious functions in the traditional Chinese society, for the Confucian scholars and for the common people respectively. The dual nature of sacrifice makes it clear that the supernatural element in sacrifice is a valuable tool in enforcing social values and in taming the masses.

The above investigation of both the theoretical and institutional dimensions of Confucianism has clearly demonstrated that religious elements are deeply structured in

³⁸² C. K. Yang, "The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion," p.276.

³⁸³ Although C. K. Yang maintains that the cultic practices of the classical religion were largely incorporated into the secular social institutions as a form of diffused religion, he does not identify these cultic practices as an integral part of Confucianism per se. See Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.304.

³⁸⁴ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.10.

Confucian value systems and its daily practices. The question on Confucian religiosity, therefore, should not be transmuted into a polemic over the presence of its religious nature. Instead, the question should address the issue of in what sense and on what condition Confucianism can be defined as “a religion,” not less justifiably than the cases of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any other religions. Since there are more than a hundred definitions of religion already, and new definitions are constantly being created,³⁸⁵ it is not possible that any definition will do justice to the problem of defining Confucianism. Valid definitions should bring new insights not only to the understanding of Confucianism in terms of religion but also to the understanding of religion with regard to the particularity of Confucianism.

Many modern scholars have endeavored to define Confucianism by appealing to certain definitions of religion, only arriving at different conclusions. One convenient way for a religious approach to Confucianism is to adopt a functionalist definition of religion, either in Emile Durkheim’s sense of “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,”³⁸⁶ or in Paul Tillich’s sense of “ultimate concern,”³⁸⁷ or in Clifford Geertz’s sense of “cultural system.”³⁸⁸ However, functionalist definitions of religion are often plagued by various problems which would in turn dissolve the concept of religion as an analytical category. These problems include: the theoretical reduction of religion to one all-explanatory function; the sanction of one perspective only in the study of religion; considerable conceptual and terminological confusion; and the creation of barriers to the

³⁸⁵ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.505.

³⁸⁶ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, tr. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915), p.47.

³⁸⁷ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and The Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p.4.

³⁸⁸ Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” (1966), reprinted in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1993), pp.87-125.

public intelligibility of the use of the term “religion” by scholars.³⁸⁹ It therefore makes little sense to define Confucianism as “a religion” when the concept of religion itself has lost its function as a conceptual instrument. This is probably why the scholars of New Confucianism, who have presumably adopted a functionalist approach to religion, seem to have projected a sort of generic “protestant” attitude towards Confucianism, “an attitude that generally abhors ritual and virtually every form of social religious activity, and esteems instead an individualistic striving for a more abstract spiritual exaltation.”³⁹⁰ As a consequence, the religious dimension of Confucianism “has been Protestantized by interpreters like [Rodney] Taylor and Tu Wei-ming to the point that there seems to be little meaningful explanation for the traditional Confucian cultus.”³⁹¹

Another tendency in approaching Confucian religiosity is to adopt a substantive definition of religion, as exemplified in the methodological orientation of the “Confucian Religion School.” However, substantive definitions of religion also have several problems: they largely depend on concepts that may not be cognitively salient among various people; they identify and circumscribe some domain of a certain society that fits the definition only problematically; by specifying a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for including or excluding a candidate, they create a situation of “yes” or “no” and thus establish overly rigid boundaries between religion and non-religion.³⁹² As has been discussed in Chapter I, contemporary Chinese scholars have generally adopted a substantive definition of religion, which is constructed in the paradigms of Christianity,

³⁸⁹ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.257-259.

³⁹⁰ Russell Kirkland, “Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition,” in *Journal of Chinese Religions* (1992) 20: 79.

³⁹¹ Kirkland, “Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition,” p.83n16.

³⁹² Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, pp.156-157.

and which takes the “belief in God” as a necessary condition for all religions.³⁹³ When this conception of religion is employed to interpret Confucian religiosity, two polarizing positions will emerge: to forcibly fit Confucianism into the format of Christianity, as in the case of the “Confucian Religion School,” or to simply dismiss the applicability of religion, as in the case of Jiang Qing.³⁹⁴

According to Benson Saler, both the functionalist definition and the substantive definition belong to the category of monothetic definition, in that they stipulate “a single feature or a set of conjunctive features that specifies what a category term basically means, for by so doing it specifies a set of necessary and sufficient features or conditions for identifying instances of the group of objects comprehended by the category.”³⁹⁵ The limitation of a monothetic definition is obvious: if any one stipulated feature or condition is missing with respect to some candidate for inclusion in the group, that candidate cannot be properly admitted. It is therefore impossible to avoid polarizing positions in defining Confucianism, which considerably defies the paradigms of Christianity. It is at this point that Benson Saler’s polythetic approach to religion opens up a new horizon in addressing the problem of defining Confucianism. Religion in Saler’s sense is therefore understood as “a graded category the instantiations of which are linked by family resemblances.”³⁹⁶ Specifically, religion as an analytical category is to be conceptualized “in terms of a pool of elements that often cluster together but that may do so in greater or lesser degrees.”³⁹⁷ Hence, with the hard and fast line between religion and non-religion

³⁹³ See Chapter I of this dissertation, p.24.

³⁹⁴ See Chapter II of this dissertation, pp.103-105. *Tian* (heaven), the Chinese equivalent of “God,” can be interpreted as either a personified supreme force or an impersonal, natural, and self-operating force, hence the ambiguity in identifying the presence of “God” in Confucianism.

³⁹⁵ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.79.

³⁹⁶ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, xiv.

³⁹⁷ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.213.

abolished, there are many sufficient but no necessary conditions for identifying something as a religion. In other words, no single element is either essential to the group membership of religion or is sufficient to make a cultural complex a member of the family of religions. We may once again refer to Martin Southwold's list of twelve attributes to inspect how Confucianism can be defined or conceptualized with regard to this polythetic approach to religion.

Of all the twelve attributes in Southwold's list,³⁹⁸ six of them find their clear presence in Confucianism, including: (4) Ritual practices: Confucian sacrificial rituals; (5) Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faith: Confucian beliefs in Heaven, fate, etc.; (6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs: Confucian value systems; (9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions: Confucian canons; (11) Association with a moral community: the Confucian ideal of *junzi* (exemplary man); (12) Association with an ethnic or similar group: the Chinese population. The other six attributes of the list, however, either have elusive and marginal relevance or are not readily applicable to the Confucian tradition. As for (1) A central concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them, all one can say is that the notion of god or spirit has a marginal presence in the Confucian metaphysics, since the Confucian notion of Heaven can refer to either a personified supreme force or an impersonal, natural force. (2) A dichotomy between the sacred and the profane: evidently, this attribute does not have relevance in Confucianism, since the Chinese religious life is best characterized as "a continuum" both theoretically and institutionally, as both Thompson and Paper have rightly argued. (3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence: how to relate the

³⁹⁸ See Chapter III of this dissertation, p.129.

notion of “salvation” to the Confucian ideal of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” (*nei sheng wai wang*)³⁹⁹ may challenge the generalizations about Confucianism and about religion. (7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of the ethical code: there is no doubt that Confucian value systems rely on sanctions from cults such as the worship of Heaven, the worship of Confucius, the worship of ancestors, etc., regardless of they being incorporated into the Confucian system or not. (8) A mythology: there do exist a lot of mystical stories in the Confucian Five Classics, though they do not play a central role in sanctioning Confucian values and worldviews. (10) A priesthood: although the emperor can be seen as the head priest of the state cult, and all ranks of local officials (Confucian scholars) participate in various rituals, they do not form a body of priesthood as such.

It should be noted that Southwold’s model only serves as a referential framework rather than a benchmark for identifying what is or is not a religion. It is practically useful because it provides a comprehensive if not exhaustive list of what is usually associated with the conception of religion. When applied to the case of defining Confucianism, it gives us an idea of how far Confucianism can make in terms of the Western prototypical understanding of religion. In this particular case, one may legitimately ask: can the presence of the six attributes, with various degrees of relevance from the other six attributes, qualify Confucianism as a religion? Although a polythetic approach requires no necessary conditions for admitting a candidate into a membership group, it does not automatically follow that the presence of the six attributes is sufficient to constitute a religion. The point is, so long as defining Confucianism is not committed to searching its

³⁹⁹ “Inner sageliness and outer kingliness” is a key notion of Neo-Confucianism, meaning that one must manifest one’s virtue not only by cultivating one’s self, but also by allowing self-cultivation to overflow into the fulfillment of responsibilities toward the family, the state, and the world. See Yao Xinzhong, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.222.

“essence,” and so long as analytical purposes are concerned, it is possible and feasible to define Confucianism as “a religion.” Consequently, the question “Is Confucianism a religion?” can be transformed into a better question “Does it make sense to define Confucianism as a religion in this particular case?” In any case, definitions of religion can be regarded as veritable theories in miniature about religion, and they relate to and partially express larger perspectives. Hence, whether or not to define Confucianism as a religion is *a situational matter*. As Benson Saler puts it, it “depends on who ‘we’ are, what our needs may be, and strategic and tactical considerations that relate to serving those needs.”⁴⁰⁰

Epistemological Significance of the Controversy

Definitions of religion based on the centrality of faith, a particularly Christian notion, ipso facto determine virtually all educated Chinese to be irreligious, supporting the Chinese understanding that religion is alien to Chinese culture. For missionaries, China appeared to be ripe for conversion, the elite seen as agnostic, and the peasants, sunk in ignorant idolatry.⁴⁰¹

This misconception of Chinese religious life can be attributed to a long line of both Western and Chinese scholars who were intoxicated with the Enlightenment sentiment. With the introduction of Western science and technology to China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Chinese intellectuals came forth to defend the dignity of Chinese culture by stressing the rationalistic view of Chinese society in general and of Confucianism in particular. Such a position can be clearly seen from the statement made by Liang Qichao, one of China’s early reformers:

Whether China has any religion at all is a question that merits serious study
...Confucius confined his attention to reality, and his views are incompatible

⁴⁰⁰ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.85.

⁴⁰¹ Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk*, p.10.

with religious matters... Since China's indigenous culture contains no religion, the history of Chinese religion is made up mainly of foreign religions introduced into China... The Chan [Zen] school of Buddhism is a Chinese product, but it belongs more properly to the realm of philosophy than of religion... Taoism is the only religion indigenous to China... but to include it in a history of Chinese religion is indeed a great humiliation... for it has repeatedly misled the people by its pagan magic and disturbed the peace and security.⁴⁰²

The only reason that Taoism was regarded by Liang Qichao as “a great humiliation” is the contempt for religion in general, and for superstition and magic in particular, of an age when rationalism enjoys supremacy. This statement represents the common attitude of modern Chinese intellectuals who were eager to justify Chinese civilization in the face of the political and economic superiority of the rationalistically oriented Western world. Hu Shih, the intellectual leader of the May Fourth Movement, presented a similar view, “the educated people in China are indifferent to religion...”⁴⁰³ Of China as a whole, he further stated, “China is a country without religion and the Chinese are a people who are not bound by religious superstitions. This is the conclusion arrived at by a number of scholars during recent years.”⁴⁰⁴ This view has so profoundly characterized the mentality of modern Chinese intellectuals that its validity and integrity have never been seriously questioned throughout the 20th century.

Joel Thoraval attributes the rationalistic interpretation of Confucianism and of Chinese culture to the imposition of Western paradigms on the Chinese reality, because, in his view, by so doing Confucianism is constructed as an ethical system compatible with Christian rationalism, replacing the position of religious practices in the family and

⁴⁰² Liang Qichao, *Yinbingshi Quanj* (“Complete Works of the Ice-drinker’s Studio”), XXIII, pp.138-41; quoted in Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.5.

⁴⁰³ Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933), p.78.

⁴⁰⁴ Hu Shi, “Ming Jiao” (The Doctrine of Names), in *Hu Shih Wencun* (Shanghai, 1928), vol.1, p.91; quoted in C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.5.

the society.⁴⁰⁵ Thoraval believes that two types of illusion are created in the process of imposition: the illusion of eclecticism, and the illusion of skepticism. According to him, the illusion of eclecticism tends to establish, incorrectly, that Chinese opt for mutually-exclusive religions based on their pragmatic interests, a perception that underestimates the inner coherence of the folk religious practices; the illusion of skepticism, on the other hand, projects a view that Chinese are not religiously pious since they switch between different religions.⁴⁰⁶ To rectify the misconception of Chinese religions, Thoraval suggests, it is imperative to renounce the pervasive and universalistic paradigms and frameworks in the study of Chinese culture and to focus instead on the marginalized concepts and activities that are related to the folk religion. One may rightly argue that Thoraval's position is not unlike Thompson's and Paper's in that they all insist on studying Chinese religions as a coherent phenomenon, and encourage a critique of the imposition of Western paradigms and frameworks on Chinese culture.

I find Thoraval's approach especially interesting, not just because he has brought new insights to the understanding of Chinese religions per se, but also because he tries to uncover the structural reasons that have given rise to the misconception of Chinese culture. Thoraval maintains that Western concepts and paradigms cannot be accurately transformed into the Chinese context due to the difference of mental structures; had they been transformed, certain values that were deeply entrenched in them would also be brought into Chinese conceptual instruments, resulting in the distortion of the truth about Chinese culture.⁴⁰⁷ The reason that few Chinese scholars would confront the Western

⁴⁰⁵ Joel Thoraval, "The Western Misconception of Chinese Religions: A Case Study of Hong Kong," tr. Zhang Ning, in *Ershiyi Shiji* (The 21st Century), 1995, vol.29, pp.144-145.

⁴⁰⁶ Thoraval, "The Western Misconception of Chinese Religions," pp.145-146.

⁴⁰⁷ Thoraval, "The Western Misconception of Chinese Religions," pp.137-138.

misconception of Chinese religions, Thoraval believes, is that their conceptual structures have been fundamentally shaped by the imported concepts and paradigms from the West. The so-called “Chinese culture” that people generally refer to in the modern time, hence, is largely a product of reconstruction undertaken by Chinese intellectuals during the last century, though the process of reconstruction itself has been forgotten or underestimated by many. This is not to say that, Thoraval contends, the traditional values and practices have totally disappeared from the modern Chinese consciousness, but rather that they still exist in the reflections and discourses of modern Chinese scholars, only with a distorted, Westernized nature.⁴⁰⁸

Illuminating as Thoraval’s perspective is, his critique of both Western and Chinese misconceptions of Chinese religions is liable to a dogmatic interpretation of the transformation of Western paradigms into the Chinese context. The introduction of modern concepts, such as religion, philosophy, science, politics, and culture, etc., to the Chinese context, is an integral part of the comprehensive project of self-renovation closely modeled on the Western civilization from the Enlightenment onwards. These modern Western concepts, though bound up with certain values and prejudices, were employed to reconstruct rather than to interpret the Chinese culture and society in the first place. The priorities for Chinese intellectuals in the wake of the Sino-West encounter were considerations about how to reconstruct China in accordance with the principles of rationalism and scientism, including whether or not to establish Chinese philosophy, whether or not to create Chinese religion(s), whether or not to introduce Western science

⁴⁰⁸ Thoraval, “The Western Misconception of Chinese Religions,” pp.145-146.

and technology, and so on.⁴⁰⁹ This sentiment has preoccupied the Chinese mentality throughout the 20th century, and is still having tremendous influence on the intellectual outlook of contemporary China. When Chinese intellectuals “misrepresent” or “misinterpret” their tradition and culture, it is more a case of active engagement in modernization than a case of cultural castration. For them, reconstruction is always preferred to interpretation. Thoraval’s problem, therefore, is to misread his project of post-modern critique into Chinese intellectuals’ project of modernization.

The other problem of Thoraval’s approach, due to his dogmatic interpretation of the Chinese attempt to reconstruct tradition and culture, resides in his simplistic negation of the impact of rationalism and pragmatism on traditional Chinese mentality. This is not to say that, by appealing to Western paradigms and frameworks, Chinese intellectuals could stay clean of reading into Chinese culture Western values and principles. The point is rather that the attempt to reconstruct Chinese culture on the model of Western civilization is strongly motivated by an instrumental commitment, which is deeply structured in the traditional Chinese mentality informed by the this-worldly orientation of Confucianism. The failure of Chinese intellectuals’ struggle to reform China to face the challenge of Western dominance, as unfolded in the last century, has far more to do with the malfunctioning of tactics than with the conflict of principles. If the ascendance of the

⁴⁰⁹ Cui Zheng, “Rujiao Wenti zai Fansi” (Rethinking of the Question on Confucian Religiosity), in <http://www.confuchina.com>.

ideology of *zong ti xi yong*⁴¹⁰ can be seen as the last glory of value rationality, the May Fourth Movement certainly symbolizes the triumph of instrumental rationality.⁴¹¹

The question on Confucian religiosity can be better understood in a perspective that differentiates the commitment to reconstruction from the commitment to interpretation. In other words, the problem of defining Confucianism in terms of religion should benefit from it being bifurcated into the project of modernization, i.e., whether Confucianism should be a religion, and the project of modernity, i.e., whether Confucianism was a religion.⁴¹² The strong opposition to Kang Youwei's Confucian religion movement, one may thus argue, was less endorsed by principles that were committed to safeguarding the "essence" of Confucianism than by an ideology of pragmatism, in which religion was depicted as the very embodiment of backwardness. Hence, the difficulty of defining Confucianism as a religion represents the last stronghold of the ideology of pragmatism, and only a destruction of this stronghold can bring the controversy from the haven of polemics to the frontier of epistemology.

While the project of modernization tries to define Confucianism in cultural and socio-political terms, the project of modernity, namely, the post-modern critique, engages it in terms of epistemology. The former approach is interested in real definitions which are striving to constitute the "essence" of Confucianism, whereas the latter approach is

⁴¹⁰ The ideology of *zhong ti xi yong* (Chinese learning for fundamental principles; Western learning for practical application) was raised by Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), who maintained that *ti*, or the essence of Chinese culture, had to be preserved at all costs, whereas *yong*, or Western technology and institutions, were merely tools to be employed to preserve the *ti*. See Charlotte Furth, *The Limits of Change* (Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.200, 215.

⁴¹¹ According to Max Weber, value rationality tends to operate only in accordance with the commands of moral principle or of belief system, whereas instrumental rationality is the rational ability to calculate probabilities and employ means for ends. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, G. Roth and C. Wittich, ed. (Berkeley, 1978), pp.25, 30, 85.

⁴¹² The proposition was first raised by Chen Ming, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Cf. the Recordings of "Confucianism and Religion Symposium" (2), in www.confucius2000.com.

engaged in nominal definitions which try to define the unknown word “Confucianism” (when conceived with regard to its religiosity) in terms of the known word “religion.”⁴¹³

The epistemological significance of the question on Confucian religiosity can only be achieved when it is detached from the cultural and socio-political agendas and is engaged in nominal definitions. Hence, a nominal approach to defining Confucianism directs scholarly attention to the fact that Confucian structural principles and ethical values did not develop out of isolation, but rather in close association with social, ethical, and political functions and with supernatural sanctions provided by sacrificial rituals.

It is interesting to note that C. K. Yang, while having established a definition of religion accountable to its local applicability and having adequately demonstrated the affinity between Confucian value systems and the supernatural agents,⁴¹⁴ refrains from defining Confucianism as a religion per se. Yang’s caution may be explained with respect to a host of factors, for example, his lack of confidence in the definitions of religion during his time, or, the difficulty of demarcating Confucianism from the cultural context of the traditional Chinese society, and so on and so forth. It is least likely, however, that he has ever been deterred by the May Fourth sentiment which conceives religion as the symbol of backwardness or as the opposite of science and democracy, even if he is nostalgic of Confucianism. From his account of the relationship between Confucianism and Chinese religious practices, the readers see a rather detached, neutral, and scholarly attitude and tone. One possibly neglected but extremely important element in Yang’s methodological hesitation, I would thus argue, is that he might be well aware of the

⁴¹³ On the difference between real definition and nominal definition, see Richard Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p.16.

⁴¹⁴ While furnishing a structural and functional definition in *Religion in Chinese Society* (p.1), C. K. Yang appeals to a substantive (theistic) definition in “The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion” (p.269).

difficulty of defining Confucianism in a way that is accountable to its historicity. As has been discussed earlier, any attempt to define Confucianism in terms of religion needs to take into account both the “metaphysical” and “physical” (institutional) dimensions of its manifestations.⁴¹⁵ While this “two-dimensional” approach is imperative to contextualize Confucianism as a sociological entity responsive to the connotations and denotations of religion as an institution, it is still afflicted with a deeply structured problem, since, as we may see, to define Confucianism this way is to project it into a textuality that has been extricated of historical actuality. That is to say, at the very moment the act of defining Confucianism in terms of religion is taking place, the conception of Confucianism is being rendered in historicity, whereas the conception of religion is not. Or, in still other words, while the concept of Confucianism as an open-ended construct is momentarily frozen in both diachronic and synchronic frames, the concept of religion as a theoretical abstract is only engaged in a synchronic lens.

The tension between the “historicity” of “Confucianism” and the “a-historicity” of “religion” has significantly complicated the question on defining Confucianism. The historicity of the conception of Confucianism, however, directs scholars’ attention to the “functional shift” of the Confucian tradition encoded in its historical development. As C. K. Yang has pointed out, Confucianism as the determining factor in Chinese culture laid down structural principles and key operational values for the traditional society.⁴¹⁶ In other words, it furnished “instrumental” functions that essentially shaped the political, economic, legal, ethical, and many other dimensions of the traditional Chinese society. The religious function of Confucianism was thus largely marginalized by its this-worldly

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Chapter III of this dissertation, p.149.

⁴¹⁶ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p.244.

orientation from within and by the contest from Buddhism and Taoism from without. Not until 1911 when the Qing Dynasty collapsed was Confucianism deprived of institutional support and of instrumental functions, due to its fundamental incompatibility with the modern principles of science and democracy. This historical transformation determines that, should Confucianism as an institution provide any service to the modern society, it has to be pursued in light of *aesthetic* rather than *instrumental* functions, aesthetic in the sense that it gives lubrication instead of foundation to the social frameworks.

On the other hand, only when the principle of state and religion separation took a hold on the mentality of Western societies did the modern identity of religion came into being. With the establishment of religious studies as an independent field of social sciences, religion was gradually conceptualized in terms of, and as a result, reassigned to, the specific domain called “religion” as such. This assignment isolated religion from the instrumental dimensions of social fabric and endowed it with aesthetic functions. From a functionalist point of view, this “purification” process of religion, namely, Christianity, in the West correlates perfectly with the “functional shift” of Confucianism in the modern Chinese society, giving rise to the sociological significance of the project of defining Confucianism. C. K. Yang’s hesitation in defining Confucianism as a religion, it might be argued, is probably due to both his restraint from this sociological vision and his primary concern with the historicity of Confucianism. However, by giving stipulative definitions of religion on one hand and circumscribing the denotations and connotations of Confucianism on the other, Yang has readily justified his position in approaching “the functional relationship between Confucian thought and Chinese religion.”

It should be stated that C. K. Yang's approach has successfully established a model for the research on the religious aspects of Confucianism that are attributable to the classical tradition predating Confucius' time. It should also be noted, however, that a thorough study of Confucian religiosity in its historical unfolding is not confined to this scope. In other words, it is not enough to understand the religious dimensions of Confucianism merely in the sense of "supernatural sanctions," as is the case of C. K. Yang. More detailed research needs to be conducted on how Confucianism as a coherent system, with both its inner and outer conditions integrated, could have engendered a working mechanism to ward off the challenge of Buddhism and Taoism. This new angle makes it an imperative to examine the religious nature of the Neo-Confucian philosophy which, as E. R. Hughes has put it, "was avowedly a reaffirmation of the sacred dogmas of an original Confucian revelation, and this with a new emphasis on the importance of the contemplative life."⁴¹⁷ According to E. R. Hughes, Neo-Confucianism may appear to be pure naturalistic philosophy and to have nothing to do with religion, yet there was religion to be found in it. He maintains that the basic emphasis on reason in the world wedded to reason in man within is itself a very religious concept, as in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas.⁴¹⁸ Additionally, E. R. Hughes contends, the religious nature of Neo-Confucianism was also embodied in its promotion of the classical religion and in the Neo-Confucian scholars' search for "illumination through revelation by means of study of the Scriptures." He therefore compares this process of institutionalization to Stoicism

⁴¹⁷ E. R. and K. Hughes, *Religion in China* (London: Hutchinson House, 1950), p.83.

⁴¹⁸ E. R. and K. Hughes, *Religion in China*, p.90.

in the days of the Roman Empire, which began as a set of philosophical theories and developed into a religion.⁴¹⁹

E. R. Hughes' vision and perspective, if not his conclusion, may find resonance in W. C. Smith's approach to the institutionalization of religious groups in the Middle East, which, Smith asserts, involved in "a process towards the crystallization in fact and the conceptualization in theory of religious systems as independent intelligible entities."⁴²⁰ As for the case of China, Smith would insist, "nothing comparable developed on this scale...until modern times," suggestive of the historical transformation of the Greek philosophic tradition, whose ideas "never emerged into a systematic, organized –ism carried by an exclusivist membership community."⁴²¹ However, Smith also believes that the Greek philosophic tradition did come nearer to becoming a membership community in the subsequent Islamic world than in the West, a process discernible in several aspects: it developed a name there, i.e., *al-Falsafah*; it was carried by a relatively small and almost identifiable group within the total community; it was a tradition with an almost authoritative source (Aristotle and to a less extent Plato) rather than an attitude of mind; the meaning of the term *al-falsafah* is more adequately rendered from Arabic into English as "the Greek philosophic tradition" than as "philosophy" generically.⁴²² Smith hence suggests that there might exist a significant parallel between the role of *al-falsafah* in classical Islamic society and that which is implied in the concept *jiao* in Chinese.⁴²³

E. R. Hughes' and W. C. Smith's approaches to the historical formation of religious systems are methodologically significant in that they both furnish a unique perspective to

⁴¹⁹ E. R. and K. Hughes, *Religion in China*, pp.83, 90.

⁴²⁰ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.97.

⁴²¹ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp.95, 97.

⁴²² Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.280n46.

⁴²³ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.280n46.

interpret a religious tradition, or alternatively, a tradition with religious qualities, in light of its historicity. Consequently, scholars are enabled to engage a certain tradition not only with the referential framework of “a religion” (a set of polythetic features manifested in history), but also with that of “religious” (in W. C. Smith’s sense of transcendence). More importantly, this approach lends insights to the understanding of the question that, under what condition a textual tradition, be it philosophical, ethical, humanistic, religious, or the combination of them, would evolve towards something called “a religion” in the course of history. From the above comparison of the Greek philosophic tradition with Confucianism, one may get the impression that when a certain tradition is exposed to a distinct or even hostile environment, it has the potential to develop into an intelligible and identifiable lineage associated with a certain group or groups. It is this historicity that underlies the institutionalizing process that may ultimately lead to “a religion.” One may realize that Ren Jiyu’s interpretation of Neo-Confucianism as a religion not only fails to address the inner religious nature of the Neo-Confucian philosophy, but also is unable to articulate the historical mechanism of the institutionalization of Neo-Confucianism, and is therefore tainted with the liability of formalism.⁴²⁴

Wouter Hanegraaff holds that the study of religions has long been complicated by the tension between a systematic and a historical perspective on religions, the former being entangled with theoretical opposites, such as universality versus specificity, generality versus unicity, necessity versus contingency, or unity versus diversity, the latter, on the other hand, being historically indebted in equal measure to two currents of thought which exemplify these very same opposites. Furthermore, this tension can be seen as one particular manifestation of the more general tension between the forces of

⁴²⁴ Cf. Chapter II of this dissertation, p.98.

“Enlightenment” and “Counter-Enlightenment” in 19th and 20th century thought.⁴²⁵ What I would like to add is that, this fundamental tension is also vividly manifested in the controversy on Confucian religiosity, with a deep disparity between the commitment to modernization (Enlightenment vision), and the commitment to post-modern critique (Counter-Enlightenment vision). Jan Platvoet has pointed out that, in the history of the research on religions, explanatory theories of religion, which are derived from the systematic perspective, have often proved to be ideologically inspired and to served strategic aims of an extra-academic kind.⁴²⁶ This is, again, especially true in the case of defining Confucianism in terms of religion.

Both Hanegraaff and Platvoet have striven to cope with the tension between the systematic perspective and the historical perspective on religions: while the former is engaged in “defining religion in spite of history,” the latter is simply “against paradigmatic integration.”⁴²⁷ The particular difficulty of defining Confucianism has proved the methodological significance of both approaches, and consequently, the indispensability of a pragmatic attitude towards the theoretical development of the concept of religion. This pragmatic attitude determines that definitions of religion should no longer be regarded as constituting truth about the “essence” of religion as such, but rather be developed, and examined, as tools for discovering, investigating, interpreting and explaining some aspects of religion, or of particular religions. As Platvoet maintains, a pragmatic definition of religion “should start from the contexts—the research fields and objects of study of the disciplines, their research projects and their particular research

⁴²⁵ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Defining Religion in spite of History,” in Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.337-339.

⁴²⁶ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.509.

⁴²⁷ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, pp.337, 504.

aims—rather than from their culturally conditioned concepts of religion, and the contests over them.”⁴²⁸ The ultimate challenge of the pragmatic approach, therefore, is to analyze and assess the heuristic, analytical and theoretical utility of the concepts of religion developed for particular, context-bound tasks. In any case, the concept of religion is an expedient category for advancing the understanding of cultures, or more broadly, the human condition. Through its pragmatic application to certain phenomena among non-Western cultures, the category of religion is engaged in a progressive process of de-Westernization by which it is gradually transformed into a more neutral, more technical instrument of research. Only this way can scholars claim that they do not create the similarity between cultures simply by extending the term, but that they apply the term because they discern some similarity.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Platvoet and Molendijk, ed., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion*, p.511.

⁴²⁹ Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion*, p.259.

CHAPTER IV

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONTROVERSY ON CONFUCIAN RELIGIOSITY

As far as the intellectual history of modern China is concerned, the cultural and historical significance of the controversy on Confucian religiosity could never be over-emphasized. The drastic shift from the paradigms of Confucianism to the paradigms of modernity around the turn of the 20th century⁴³⁰ has constituted a recurring situation in which the Chinese would constantly have to transcend themselves in order to understand the way they used to be and the way they are going to be. The ultra-Confucian posture of the question on Confucian religiosity, i.e., the fact that the integrity of Confucianism has to be testified in the Western category of religion, is vividly suggestive of a strong case of disconnection between tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience. As Joseph Levenson has poignantly pointed out, “somewhere ... in the course of the years between Matteo Ricci and Liang Qichao, Confucianism had lost the initiative.”⁴³¹ It should also be noted that, this loss of initiative was formally declared during the May Fourth period when Chinese tradition was transformed from “knowledge resources” (*zhishi ziyuan*) to “academic resources” (*xueshu ziyuan*) for the intellectuals that were imbued with the spirit of science and democracy.⁴³²

Chang Hao calls the period from 1895 (Sino-Japan war) to 1925 (the end of the May Fourth movement) “the transformation period of Chinese modern history,” during which

⁴³⁰ See Chang Hao, “Zhongguo Jindai Sixiang de Zhuanxing Shidai” (The Transformation Period of the Intellectual History of Modern China), in *Ershiyi Shiji* (21st Century), April, 1999, Hong Kong.

⁴³¹ Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1968), ix.

⁴³² Zhang Qing, “Chuantong: you ‘Zhishi Ziyuan’ dao ‘Xueshu Ziyuan’—jianxi ershi shiji zhongguo wenhua chuantong de shiluo jiqi chengyin” (Tradition: from “Knowledge Resources” to “Academic Resources”), *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (Chinese Social Sciences), 2000, no.4, p.190.

China had experienced dual crises: the crisis of ethics and faith, and the crisis of the social and political order.⁴³³ He maintains that the modernizing process of China was very different from Western modernization. In the West, the Reformation had successfully separated the church from the state, and retained the stability and credibility of the ethical system embedded in Christianity, which still exerts tremendous influence over modern Western societies. In contrast, the Confucian tradition did not dissociate itself from the social, political system by confining itself to a specific domain such as “religion.” Hence, when the institutional supports of Confucianism were torn down overnight, the discipline of faith and ethics integrated in the Confucian system immediately collapsed. According to Chang Hao, the destruction of the Confucian faith system can be seen as a “loss of meaning” for the Chinese people, and the intellectual history of China in the past one and a half centuries has been engaged in a ceaseless process of meaning-searching.

Three competitive ideologies have striven to fill the meaning vacuum left out by the Confucian tradition: liberalism, Marxism, and cultural conservatism with the school of New Confucianism as the primary representative. Since liberalism is neutral and silent on the issue of ultimate meaning, it could not take over the place that was once held by the holistic structure of Confucianism.⁴³⁴ The mechanic cosmology embodied in the liberal worldview appears diametrically opposed to the teleological cosmology that used to have a strong hold on the traditional society. Moreover, science as a primary value of liberalism is just a cognitive tool for human beings to explore the empirical world, and it is unable to solve the ultimate problem of value and faith. In Western societies, the crisis

⁴³³ Chang Hao, “Zhongguo Jindai Sixiang de Zhuanxing Shidai.”

⁴³⁴ Chang Hao, “Zhongguo Jindai Sixiang de Zhuanxing Shidai.”

of meaning has been significantly defused and neutralized by the relative independence of the holistic structure, namely, Christianity.

Cultural conservatism, especially New Confucianism, is whole-heartedly dedicated to the reconstruction of a modern Chinese meaning system. It is interested in an ontological and metaphysical reinterpretation of the Confucian learning. Like Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism,⁴³⁵ it approaches the problem of meaning by appealing to the religio-ethical ideals of *neisheng waiwang* (inner sageliness and outer kingliness) and *tianren heyi* (the unity of heaven and human being). But it remains unclear as to how this striving for *neisheng waiwang* and *tianren heyi* would find a conjecture point with the scientific and technological paradigms of modern society. Like liberalism, New Confucianism is unable to integrate the metaphysical realm of faith and morality and the empirical realm of political and social order as a coherent and functional whole.

Given the impotence of liberalism and cultural conservatism in bridging the gap between the empirical and the ontological, the arrival of Marxism to modern China is hardly a surprise. The holistic nature of Marxism determines its more operational and effective hold on the meaning system of Chinese people, especially during a radically transforming period. On the one hand, the utopian anticipation of communism and the revolutionary worldview of Marxism brought an ethical stimulation to Chinese intellectuals thirsty of faith; on the other, its design of a social, political order, and its promise of independence, democracy, unification, and equality, could be promptly employed to transform its ideology into an operational, powerful mobilization of the society. The victory of Marxism in 1949 suggests a temporary overcoming of the

⁴³⁵ Song Neo-Confucianism developed into two disparate schools: the School of Principle represented by Cheng Hao and Zhu Xi, and the School of Mind represented by Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming.

meaning problem in modern China, but it was only a crisis-solution in the face of the holistic disintegration of tradition. When modernization has moved on to a more sophisticated level, Marxism becomes more and more outmoded and would eventually lose its hold on modern Chinese consciousness.

The “loss of meaning” in modern China is complicated in a dual nature: it is about the disruption not just between the ontological and the empirical, but also between the present and the past. The tension between “history” and “value,” as phrased by Joseph Levenson,⁴³⁶ is both historical-cultural and ontological at the same time. The problem of meaning for Chinese is also the problem of tradition and modernity, which cannot be thoroughly addressed without appealing to Confucianism. Therefore, it is of both historical and ontological significance that we have to constantly return to the Confucian tradition to approach the problem of modernization and the problem of modernity in the Chinese experience.

Fractured Continuity Between Tradition and Modernity

The vicious circle of repeated frustrations and humiliations on the page of modern Chinese history has made any discussion of tradition extremely provocative and resentful for many Chinese intellectuals. While the Qing Dynasty in its last decades (1840-1911) is often regarded as the very archetype of stagnation, the dysfunctional Republic in its early years is generally seen as a hotbed for revolutions. One thing for sure is that the anti-traditionalist mentality has profoundly and decisively shaped the intellectual landscape of China in the 20th century. The failure to reform China with the formula of *zhongti*

⁴³⁶ See Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern China*, xxvii-xxxiii.

*xiyong*⁴³⁷—Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as function—during the late Qing period eventually gave birth to an attitude of “totalistic iconoclasm” which was committed to a fundamental break with the entire cultural and socio-political order of the past.⁴³⁸ Following the May Fourth initiative, many generations of Chinese intellectuals have endeavored to execute a wholesale Westernization of China by renouncing the cultural roots of their tradition which they thought were corrupted and backward. This sentiment of radical anti-traditionalism has created uniquely a Chinese experience that differs from the situations of India and of the Muslim world where “intellectuals have often tended to discern compatibilities rather than stark antitheses between Islam and socialism, Hinduism and democracy, etc.”⁴³⁹

While the iconoclastic attitude of the May Fourth intellectuals can be explained in cultural and socio-political terms, it is impossible to determine what specific conditions had actually contributed to the formation of such a sentiment. It is fair to say that nationalism, social Darwinism, and the acceptance of Western ideas about science and democracy all had their share in creating the intellectual background of that period, but no factor should be held as single-handedly responsible for the May Fourth mentality. In his *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, Lin Yu-Sheng suggests that the iconoclastic attitude can be traced to some kind of “cultural-intellectualistic approach,” which was in turn “influenced by a deep-seated traditional Chinese cultural predisposition, in the form

⁴³⁷ Systematically developed by the Qing reformer Zhang Zhidong as a theoretical device to reconcile the relationship between Chinese learning and Western learning, the *ti-yong* formula was intended to introduce Western science and technology to preserve the essence of Chinese culture. See Zhang Zhidong, “Quan Xue Pian,” in *Zhang Wenxiangong Quanj* (Beijing, 1928).

⁴³⁸ Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp.5-7.

⁴³⁹ See Benjamin I. Schwartz’s foreword to Lin Yu-Sheng’s *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, ix.

of a monistic and intellectualistic mode of thinking.”⁴⁴⁰ The cultural atmosphere during the formative years of the May Fourth intellectuals, Lin assures, was permeated with this monistic and intellectualistic emphasis on the function of the mind, a notion that stressed the necessary priority of intellectual and cultural change over political, social, and economic changes. This mode of thinking further assumed that cultural change could best be achieved through changing people’s ideas concerning their total conception of, and in relationship to, both cosmic and human reality. In other words, a change of basic ideas was the most fundamental change, the source of other changes.⁴⁴¹

According to Lin Yu-Sheng, there is a causal connection between the “monistic and intellectualistic mode of thinking” and the inner structure of Chinese culture that could be dated back to the very origin of Chinese civilization. He attributes this causality to two historical and cultural threads that have exerted decisive influence on the formation of the modern consciousness: first, the universal kingship had integrated the socio-political order and the cultural-moral order as a highly correlated system, and the breakdown of the former would inevitably undermine the latter; second, one of the most important characteristics of Confucian modes of thinking, the emphasis on the function of the inward moral and/or intellectual experience of the mind, had been consistent from the time of Mencius and Xunzi up to the modern age.⁴⁴² With the breakdown of the cultural and socio-political order as a result of the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the cultural-intellectualistic approach evolved into a holistic mode of thinking and became a weapon for iconoclastic totalism: the Chinese tradition was attacked as an organismic whole

⁴⁴⁰ Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p.28.

⁴⁴¹ Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, pp.26-27.

⁴⁴² Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, pp.17, 41.

whose nature was infected by the disease of the traditional Chinese mind.⁴⁴³ That is to say, the wholesale disintegration of Chinese tradition furnished the structural possibility—the external condition—for the May Fourth iconoclasts to use a traditionally derived mode of thinking—the inner condition—to stage their totalistic attack on Chinese tradition at a very fundamental level.

Lin Yu-Sheng's interpretation of the May Fourth sentiment merits serious attention because it discloses the "ideological basis" underlying the iconoclastic attitude in the midst of unprecedented cultural and socio-political crises. His perspective is especially appealing when employed to explain the ascendancy of a host of totalistic ideologies during the first half of the 20th century—anarchism, "wholesale Westernization," communism, and the like—in the once predominantly Confucian land. One may easily follow the logic of Lin's reasoning which is manifested in a very simple format: since the old was rejected as a whole, the new had to be accepted as a whole. However, one needs to bear in mind that Lin's cause and effect equation, while perfectly neat in appearance, has been far overstretched in serving his argumentation. Despite his downplaying of the social and political factors in formulating the May Fourth sentiment,⁴⁴⁴ the grave consequences of the failure of the political reform in 1898 and of the revolution of 1911 could not possibly be underestimated. In fact, the lack of real opportunity for social and political change simply forced many Chinese intellectuals to seek any explanation possible in the wake of national crises. The intense anxiety for survival would sooner or later make it an imperative for the intellectuals to launch a totalistic attack on traditional

⁴⁴³ Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, p.29.

⁴⁴⁴ See Lin Yu-Sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*, pp.39-40.

Chinese culture which they believed had loomed so large in the shadow of modern Chinese consciousness.

The victory of communism in China did not bring an end to the search for an all-embracing explanation of national crises of the recent history, nor did it diminish, let alone resolve, the confrontation between tradition and modernity that has preoccupied the modern Chinese consciousness. On the contrary, the continuing frustration in the striving for a full-scale modernization in the second half of the 20th century has further ensnared Chinese intellectuals in an ironic situation. While many of them are impelled to inquire into the possibility of Confucian inner structures still casting a spell on the modern Chinese mentality,⁴⁴⁵ others lament over the sheer fact that modernization has so far been engaged in a way indifferent to, or even at the expense of, tradition. Still others, in defiance of both attitudes, are calling for an examination of the compatibilities between liberalism and Chinese culture, or, in different terms, democracy and Confucianism. The perplexity and paradox of modernization is that, after nearly a century's struggle, Chinese intellectuals have come a full circle to the starting point of the May Fourth generation, namely, the daunting task to decode the enigma of the persistent confrontation between tradition and modernity. The common character that contemporary intellectuals and the May Fourth iconoclasts share, this despite their own differences, is that they have very little common ground with the traditional Confucian scholars in terms of theoretical and practical cultivations. As the New Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming has pointed out, one of the most important "traditions" of China in the past one and a half centuries is

⁴⁴⁵ See Jin Guantao, "Rujia Wenhua de Shenceng Jiegou dui Makesi Zhuyi Zhongguohua de Yingxiang" (The Impact of Confucian Inner Structures on the Sinization of Marxism), in www.xgc2000.com.

precisely the tradition of “anti-traditionalism,” which, along with the other “traditions,” has profoundly molded the modern Chinese consciousness.⁴⁴⁶

In his well-known book *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, Joseph Levenson interprets the disengagement of modernization with tradition in the Chinese experience as a cultural situation of “fractured continuity,” in which the Confucian tradition had lost its wholeness and contemporary relevance and had become merely historically significant, no longer part of a living tradition offering genuine inspiration for the present.⁴⁴⁷ As a consequence, traditional Chinese culture, while continuously disintegrating, had to be interpreted in the spirit of the Western intrusion in order to save its fragments. Unlike any time before, such as the Jesuit golden days of the 17th century, when innovations from the West could be slipped into the Chinese language as simply new “vocabulary,” the Sino-West encounter since the mid-19th century had brought to China the intrusive Western science and technology which would certainly trigger “a change of language.”⁴⁴⁸ This process of disintegration is what Levenson has called the “museumization” of the Confucian tradition.

It should be pointed out, however, that Levenson’s interpretation of the historical transformation of Confucianism relies heavily on several key dichotomies, among which the antithesis between “history” and “value” is especially important.⁴⁴⁹ He is convinced that the modernization that had transformed the recent history of Western civilization would have an irresistible, irreversible, and all-embracing impact on China as well as on

⁴⁴⁶ See Tu Wei-ming, *Xiandai Jingshen yu Rujia Chuantong* (Modern Spirit and the Confucian Tradition) (Taipei: Lianjing Chuban Shiye Gongsi, 1996), pp.22-25. According to Tu, other “traditions” of China in the past 150 years include: the tradition of humiliation since the Opium War, the tradition of Marxism and Leninism, the tradition of the Cultural Revolution, and the tradition of reform in the past two decades.

⁴⁴⁷ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, ix, x.

⁴⁴⁸ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, vol. I, p.160.

⁴⁴⁹ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, xi, xii.

the whole non-Western world. Therefore, the culture of modernity had become the first truly universal culture of mankind, and other societies could survive as societies only if they assimilated essential features of modernity such as specialization of function and the rationalization of the world. These essential features, Levenson maintains, could not be separated from the totality of modern Western culture in all its more vital aspects any more than the vital components of traditional Chinese culture could be separated from the integral totality of that culture. The traditional culture as a whole would thus be displaced by modern culture as a whole. Fragments of the cultural whole of the past might survive but such fragments would be essentially lifeless and insignificant.⁴⁵⁰

One can hardly fail to notice that Levenson's dichotomy of "history" and "value" bears surprising similarity with the abstract antithesis between reason and tradition formulated in the Enlightenment rationale. Like the Enlightenment notion of tradition, Levenson's "history" is stripped of its very vitality and has to be museumized as some kind of antique, whereas his "value" is always present and repudiated of any sense of historicity. As a result, he only finds in the Confucian tradition an aesthetic relevance and historical significance for the modern Chinese because Confucianism had been "transformed from a primary, philosophical commitment to a secondary, romantic one."⁴⁵¹ One may argue that Levenson's history/value antithesis is prone to historicism and is therefore rigid and dogmatic when compared with, say, Hans Gadamer's interpretation of tradition as a process of "continuous transmutation."⁴⁵² This argument is especially intriguing when one considers Levenson's categorical denial of the possibility of reconciliation between the "Confucian past" and the "modern West," both conceived

⁴⁵⁰ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, vol. III, pp.113-115.

⁴⁵¹ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, vol. I, xxix, xxx.

⁴⁵² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), p.250.

by him as a kind of consistent whole. However, it should also be emphasized that, despite his methodological limitation, the strength of Levenson's approach resides rather in his articulation of the "paradigm shift" of modern China, a vision that would enable one to understand how the textuality of the tension between tradition and modernity had been historically formulated in the modern Chinese experience. The shift of Confucianism's status from "value" to "history" in Levenson's sense, I would thus suggest, can be better understood with regard to Zhang Qing's study of the transformation of Chinese tradition from "knowledge resources" to "academic resources" in the May Fourth period.⁴⁵³

Unlike Levenson's approach relying heavily on conceptual constructions, Zhang Qing's research of the modern transformation of Chinese tradition is statistically oriented. By investigating articles published in *La Jeunesse* (Xin Qingnian), the flagship magazine of the May Fourth intellectuals, Zhang intends to examine how Confucianism was dismissed as the ultimate sanction for the legitimacy of political institutions and social regulations during the May Fourth period. According to Zhang, the immediate impression from surveying the texts of *La Jeunesse* is, on the one hand, the dissolution of the authority and sacredness of Confucian classics, and on the other, the treatment of *jing* (Confucian classics), *shi* (history), *zi* (philosophy), *ji* (miscellaneous collections) as equal constituents of Chinese tradition.⁴⁵⁴ Moreover, the way traditional sources were quoted in the discourses of *La Jeunesse* had clearly demonstrated the dethronement of the Confucian tradition. While positive quotations came from a wide range of traditional texts and usually conveyed abstract concepts and ideas, negative ones mostly came from Confucian classics and were employed to wage specific attacks on Confucian rites, such

⁴⁵³ Zhang Qing, "Chuantong: you 'Zhishi Ziyuan' dao 'Xueshu Ziyuan'," p.190.

⁴⁵⁴ Zhang Qing, "Chuantong: you 'Zhishi Ziyuan' dao 'Xueshu Ziyuan'," p.194.

as the patriarchal system, the inequality between men and women, and the observance of *sangang wuchang* (three guidelines and five permanent principles), etc.⁴⁵⁵ It is clear that the antithesis between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity served as a default assumption underlying all the discourses in *La Jeunesse*. For the May Fourth intellectuals, therefore, traditional values and ideas had lost their ability to define political and social norms of the modern time and had to be held accountable to the principles of science and democracy sanctioned by the spirit of Enlightenment.

The radical transformation of modern Chinese consciousness, as portrayed above, has created a special situation in which the controversy on Confucian religiosity cannot be thoroughly understood without addressing the tension between Chinese tradition and modernity. As has been discussed in Chapter One, the very formulation of the question on Confucian religiosity has presumably recognized and accepted modern categorizations and compartmentalizations which were implemented in accord with Western scientific principles and norms.⁴⁵⁶ While Confucianism as an all-embracing and omnipresent domain had once defined the nature of traditional Chinese culture, nowadays it has to be defined and evaluated by categories and principles from the West, the paradigm of modernity. The effort to engage Confucianism in the modern category of religion is but one peculiar approach—there are many other approaches—to the understanding of tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience. It is in this sense that the controversy on Confucian religiosity can be regarded as conveying a “modern” problem in a double

⁴⁵⁵ Zhang Qing, “Chuantong: you ‘Zhishi Ziyuan’ dao ‘Xueshu Ziyuan,’” p.196.

⁴⁵⁶ Cf. Chapter I of this dissertation, p.10.

sense, namely, the problem of understanding Chinese modernization, and the problem of understanding modernity from a Chinese perspective.⁴⁵⁷

The problem of understanding Chinese modernization focuses on the question of how to interpret the Chinese struggle to maintain sovereignty and dignity in the face of Western intrusion on the one hand, and to establish democracy and freedom amid the disintegration of both socio-political and cultural-moral order on the other. In other words, the challenge of Chinese modernization should be understood with regard to the intellectual concern about national survival in both political and cultural senses. Kang Youwei's attempt to interpret Confucianism as a philosophy of reform and as a religion had prophetically highlighted the urgency of this problem.⁴⁵⁸ The May Fourth intellectuals, though having adopted an approach totally different from Kang's, were actually wrestling with the same problem. Even Ren Jiyu's proposition to interpret Confucianism as a religion half a century later is still obsessed with the question of Chinese modernization, though his approach is detached from direct social and political agendas. Along with the transformation of the social and political conditions in China in the 20th century, the intellectual inclination to reflect the question of modernization against the backdrop of Confucianism has finally reached some kind of consensus that can be best summed up in one of Ren Jiyu's well known statements, "wherever there is a place for Confucianism, there is no place for modernization."⁴⁵⁹

The controversy on Confucian religiosity is also significant to the understanding of the problem of modernity from specifically a Chinese perspective, one that pivots on the question about Chinese cultural identity and about humanity in general as in response to

⁴⁵⁷ Cui Zheng, "Rujiao Wenti zai Fansi," in <http://www.confuchina.com>.

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. Chapter II of this dissertation, pp.78-86.

⁴⁵⁹ Ren Jiyu, *Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji*, p.21.

the challenge of modernization. While the majority of Chinese intellectuals in the 20th century are preoccupied with the question of modernization, the understanding of the problem of modernity needs to be engaged with regard to the contemporary relevance of Chinese tradition. For this reason, the school of New Confucianism stands out from other intellectual lineages by its commitment to approaching the problem of modernity from a Confucian perspective. For the New Confucian scholars, the problem of modernity is essentially the “problem of meaning,” i.e., what it means to be a human being, and what it means to be a Chinese in the modern age. While the first dimension explores the ultimate meaning of life in light of Confucian transcendence (immanence), the second examines the meaning of Chineseness in historical and cultural perspectives.⁴⁶⁰ As has been widely observed, what is at stake in the controversy on Confucian religiosity is the possibility and feasibility of Confucianism relocating and reinventing itself in the post-Confucian paradigms. The cultural and socio-political conditions giving rise to the controversy have suggested that the Chinese approach to the question about modernity has always been contested by the commitment to the general and the commitment to the special. This is so because the confrontation between tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience is manifest not just between the old and the new, but also between, to borrow another set of antithesis from Levenson, “ours” and “theirs.”

New Confucian Approach to the Problem of Modernity

The theoretical orientation of New Confucianism needs to be reflected in the context of cultural and socio-political problems facing the May Fourth generation, i.e., the crisis

⁴⁶⁰ Zheng Jiadong, *Duanlie zhong de Chuantong: Xinnian yu Lixing zhi jian* (Tradition in Disruption: between Faith and Rationality) (Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2001).p.290.

of meaning due to the disintegration of tradition and the triumph of scientism in the early decades of the 20th century. From the very beginning New Confucianism has assumed a conservative appearance which is usually conceived as a reaction against modernization that did not come to the terms of Confucianism. After its exile to Hong Kong and Taiwan after the Communist Party took over the mainland in 1949, New Confucianism has survived three decades' oblivion as the only intellectual school that holds a sympathetic position on Chinese culture. In comparison with other trends of Chinese cultural conservatism in the early 20th century, the New Confucian response to the challenge of modernization is registered by its strong inclination to identify Chinese civilization specifically with Confucianism, the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism in particular. It is also characterized by a universalistic claim that Confucianism features some fundamental values cross-culturally relevant for the modern age.

The New Confucian approach to the problem of modernity is most explicitly stated in its declaration about Chinese culture published in 1958: "A Manifesto to the World on Chinese Culture."⁴⁶¹ The central theme of the Manifesto is to clarify typical Western misunderstandings of Chinese culture and to present the ethico-spiritual symbolism of Neo-Confucianism as a valid answer to the question of modernity. It trumpets the New Confucian battle against scientific positivism by championing an intuitive and empathic mode of thinking which appreciates the spirit and meaning of Chinese tradition in terms of their contemporary relevance. For the New Confucian scholars, the intrinsic values of Chinese tradition can only be grasped with "sympathy and respect," since any real comprehension of tradition requires something more than the lone exercise of intellect.

⁴⁶¹ Co-signed by Zhang Junmai, Mou Zongsan, Tan Junyi, and Xu Fuguan, the Manifesto was published in the beginning of 1958, in *Minshu Pinglun* (Democratic Tribune), under the Chinese title "Wei Zhongguo Wenhua Jinggao Shijie Renshi Xuanyan."

This methodological position allows them to approach the problem of modernity by appealing to the ethico-spiritual symbolism of Confucianism, an orientation that has a deep sense of religiousness. Hence, the Manifesto rejects the conventional view held by Western sinologists that Confucianism barely goes beyond the preaching of moral principles and interpersonal manners, and affirms the transcendental value and religious spirit of the Confucian tradition:

With regard to Chinese civilization, for many years there has prevailed a view among many people both in China and abroad, that Chinese civilization put its emphasis on moral relationships between people and de-emphasized religious belief in God. This view is not mistaken in principle. However, many people are of the opinion that the moral culture which is the focal point of Chinese civilization only seeks to order actual human relations so as to maintain social and political stability. They also think that there is no religious feeling of transcendence and that the Chinese moral thought does not go beyond prescribing norms for proper behavior and thereby fails to provide a basis for inner spiritual life. These views are seriously mistaken.⁴⁶²

The Manifesto identifies the Neo-Confucian doctrine of *xin-xing* (mind and nature), which conveys the Confucian notion of transcendence and the belief in the numinous, as the core of Chinese culture.⁴⁶³ It rejects the inclination to interpret *xing* either in a naturalistic, psychological or in a materialistic sense, and embraces a metaphysical view in which *xing* is understood as the source of moral consciousness. The Manifesto further emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the inner transcendence of *xing* and the outer transcendence of *tian* (heaven) or *tiandao* (the way of heaven). While *tian* or *tiandao* is believed to refer to the metaphysical ground of being and source of meaning, *xing* as the transcendental moral self is regarded as an endowment from heaven.

According to the Neo-Confucian notion of *xin-xing*, the ultimate meaning of humanity resides in the actualization of transcendence, i.e., the unity of heaven and human being

⁴⁶² “Xuanyan,” p.6; translation quoted in Chang Hao, “New Confucianism and the Intellectual Crisis of Contemporary China,” in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change*.

⁴⁶³ “Xuanyan,” pp.8-9.

(*tianren heyi*).⁴⁶⁴ In other words, human nature reflects the nature of heaven, and the morality of humankind is also that of heaven. The way to perfect humanity is thereby to follow the way of heaven.

The doctrine of *xin-xing*, especially the notion of *tianren heyi*, holds the key to understanding the religious spirit and the transcendental value of Neo-Confucianism. It is through the process of actualizing the way of heaven in humanity that the religiousness of Confucianism is ultimately channeled. Because of the oneness of heaven and human being, the problem of how to actualize the way of heaven is also the problem of how to actualize the *xing*, or the inner moral self in human life. According to the doctrine of *xin-xing*, the actualization of the way of heaven in humanity needs to be pursued in the ideal of self-cultivation (*xiushen*) through its engagement in an endless and rigorous process of moral-spiritual discipline.⁴⁶⁵ The effort of self-cultivation requires the conjunction of practice and understanding since it is a long-held conviction in the Confucian tradition that moral conduct and comprehension are closely connected and thus must progress together. As a consequence, what appears to be obedience to social regulations or to divine behests is in the understanding no more than the fulfillment of *xin-xing*. The human will in the application of moral principles is unlimited in its involvement, and the fulfillment of *xin-xing* is also unlimited. In other words, the only way to fulfill the moral principles in all activities is to endeavor to the utmost in accordance with the doctrine of *xin-xing*. This is the Neo-Confucian ideal of “conformity of heaven and man in virtue” (*tianren hede*), which is believed to have achieved “a high degree of religiousness” since

⁴⁶⁴ “Xuanyan,” p.8.

⁴⁶⁵ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi* (The Distinguishing Characteristics of Chinese Philosophy) (Hong Kong, 1963), pp.68-78.

to engage in moral effort is at the same time to fulfill one's inner real self and thereby also to follow the command of heaven.⁴⁶⁶

The sense of religiousness inherent in the Neo-Confucian doctrine of *xin-xing* is also embodied in the moral and spiritual ideal of *ren*, which originally refers to the notion of benevolence or human-heartedness. As a fundamental concept of the Neo-Confucian metaphysics, *ren* is used to connote the ethical and spiritual dimension of humanity resulting from the integration of the inner moral self (*xing*) and the metaphysical ground of being (*tiandao*). Mou Zongsan, one of the most prominent New Confucian scholars, has maintained that the inner function of *ren* is to achieve sagehood, whereas its external function is to correlate to the transcendental notions of *xing* and *tiandao*.⁴⁶⁷ In other words, the actualization of the way of heaven in humanity is verified and contemplated in the ethical and spiritual principle of *ren*. But the more profound implication of *ren*, according to Mou Zongsan, is embedded in the ontological sense of "creativity," which generates an overflow of vitality fueling the growth of life in the cosmos. *Ren* in this sense points to the ultimate reality where everything is unified with everything else and with the universe as a whole. It is thus clear that, under the auspices of the development of New Confucianism, the moral ideal of *ren* has been imposed with an ontological significance comparable in its nature and function to God in Christianity.⁴⁶⁸

Many New Confucian scholars have insisted that the contemporary relevance of Confucianism resides in its combination of an orientation to this world with an aspiration for transcendence.⁴⁶⁹ The doctrine of *xin-xing*, the notion of *tianren heyi*, and the moral-

⁴⁶⁶ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, pp.89-101.

⁴⁶⁷ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, p.49.

⁴⁶⁸ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, pp.43-44.

⁴⁶⁹ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, pp.68-78, 96-97.

spiritual ideal of *ren* all indicate that Neo-Confucianism places great emphasis on the significance of transcendence and assigns the ultimate source of meaning and value to the numinous beyond, i.e., the way of heaven. But these same notions also suggest that the transcendent can achieve moral and ethical relevance through its actualization in humanity. Hence, the way of heaven is inherent in the daily life of every individual. The ultimate value and meaning of human life can be immanently actualized in this world regardless of their transcendental sanction. The moral-spiritual principle of *ren* is specifically reflected in the Confucian vision of moral transformation of this world to achieve the universal humanization of existence, a vision that is best captured in the supreme ideal of *neisheng waiwang*, or “inner sageliness and outer kingliness”—that is, an individual’s inner moral cultivation and perfection would express itself outwardly in benevolent management of the outer reality through the actualization of *ren*.⁴⁷⁰

According to the Confucian ideal of *neisheng waiwang*, both the moral perfection of one’s personality and the attainment of sagehood dispense the external grace of God. The New Confucian scholars believe that an individual’s moral cultivation is motivated by the inner source of the human mind—the heaven-endowed *xing*, and that the attainment of sagehood is within the reach of every ordinary individual. Moreover, the individual who has attained sagehood must go beyond the realm of moral and spiritual cultivation and concern him/herself with the outer world. But the challenge for New Confucianism still remains as to how to bridge the gap between *neisheng*, the inner realm of moral cultivation, and *waiwang*, the outer realm of reality. Despite Confucianism’s this-worldly orientation, the failure of *neisheng waiwang* to address the social, political, and economic problems in the traditional Chinese society is widely acknowledged by New Confucian

⁴⁷⁰ Mou Zongsan, *Xinti yu Xingt* (The Substance of Mind and the Substance of Nature) (Taipei, 1968), p.6.

thinkers. The problem became all the more uncompromising when the West invaded the impotent China with the aid of not just guns and ships but also a whole range of advanced systems. Partially because of the cruel reality of Western intrusion, and partially because of the intellectual legacy of the May Fourth generation, New Confucianism has been trying to innovate the concept of *neisheng waiwang* simply by aligning it with the twin triumphs of the modern Western civilization, that is, science and democracy.⁴⁷¹

The failure to develop science and democracy in the traditional Chinese society has strongly suggested the deficiency of Confucianism to cope with the problems of the outer world. But this liability does not prevent the New Confucian scholars from elevating the instrumental significance of Confucianism to the equivalence of its moral and spiritual importance. For them, the challenge of Chinese modernization is not about the question of whether Chinese culture is compatible with science and democracy, but rather about the question of how Chinese culture can be creatively transformed so that the values of science and democracy may take root in the native soil. The New Confucian scholars believe that an innovated ideal of *neisheng waiwang* would dispose the Chinese toward accepting Western science and democracy. The striving for the development of science, according to them, would be facilitated by the individual's active involvement in the outer world as the precept of moral perfection requires, and by a strong element of pragmatism in Confucianism which acknowledges the importance of material well-being for the moral transformation of people. Hence, the development of science becomes an imperative when the Confucian moral obligation to humanize the outer world is

⁴⁷¹ Mou Zongsan, *Lishi Zhixue* (Philosophy of History) (Hong Kong, 1962), pp.164-193; also see "Xuanyan" (the Manifesto), pp.11-14.

considered; in return, Chinese culture would be greatly renovated and enriched by this universalistic commitment.⁴⁷²

As for the relationship between democracy and Confucian moral and spiritual ideals, the New Confucian scholars see even greater degree of congeniality. They believe that there was a native potential for developing democratic institutions and ideology in the traditional Chinese society, though it did not evolve into a full blossom in the modern age. However, the combined tradition of moral and ideological protest and institutional restraints that curbed the rampage of political despotism in the traditional society would readily lay a foundation for the growth of democracy in modern China. For the New Confucian scholars, democracy is the institution that facilitates the utmost fulfillment of the spirit of public-mindedness, which is perfectly manifested in the Confucian utopian ideal of *tianxia wei gong* (all-under-heaven belongs to the public); at the same time, the Confucian conception that sagehood is within the reach of every individual promotes the democratic idea that people are entitled to equal status because of their moral autonomy. Therefore, the New Confucian scholars strongly believe that the principles and values of democracy are in full compatibility with the Confucian ideal of *ren*.⁴⁷³

From the perspective of New Confucianism, the problem of modernity is essentially about the question of how to understand the challenge of modernization in terms of Confucian moral-spiritual symbolism. To a large extent, the development of the Neo-Confucian ideal of *neisheng waiwang* has furnished solidly a metaphysical foundation for the novel notions of science and democracy. Meanwhile, the Confucian doctrines of *ren* and *xin-xing* with innovated interpretations have lent useful insights to understanding the

⁴⁷² “Xuanyan,” pp.11-13.

⁴⁷³ “Xuanyan,” pp.11-13.

existential situations of human life. The quest for meaning has led the New Confucian scholars to see in Confucianism not just historical significance, as Joseph Levenson has insisted, but also a living tradition with moral and spiritual relevance which they feel like belonging to. By interpreting away the blow of modernization which is at odds with the moral idealism of Confucianism, the modern world has once again become meaningful for the New Confucian scholars. They can now appeal to Confucian principles and values not just for moral orientation but also for explanation of life and of the world. As far as the all-explanatory framework of Confucianism goes, the integrity of humanity is safely guarded in terms of the notion of heaven-human-unity, which prescribes that nature and society are a humanized totality.

In an age that is stuck between the old and the new, between things foreign and native, the problem of meaning is always complicated by the commitment to the general and the commitment to the special. In the case of New Confucianism, the former refers to the question about humanity facing all societies, and the latter signifies the crisis of Chinese cultural identity in the wake of Western intrusion. While the problem of meaning in the Chinese experience arose as a result of the influx of science and democracy, New Confucianism cannot be explained in terms of modernization only from a diachronic perspective. The wholesale disintegration of Chinese tradition has exceeded what is asked for by modernization, all the more so when synchronically compared with the relative prosperity of Christianity in the Western world. It is therefore not a coincidence that the New Confucian scholars have constantly endeavored to expound the religious dimension of Confucianism in order to exorcize the spell of modernization. They are just perfectly aware that behind the marching squad of science and democracy, there lurks the shadow

of Christianity which would eventually diminish their fragile feeling of moral and cultural superiority that has so far been carefully kept in the greenhouse of New Confucianism. However, precisely because of this desperate attempt to keep balance between the concern over humanity and over Chineseness, New Confucianism has easily become vulnerable to criticisms from both the liberal front and other conservative camps.

Theoretical Limitation of New Confucianism

The radical transformation of modern China has forced Chinese intellectuals to cope with the challenge of modernization that did not come to the terms of Confucianism from the very beginning. The challenge involves both the question of how to adjust China to the modern spirit, i.e., science and democracy, and the question of how to maintain Chinese cultural identity during a time of disintegration. As an integral part of the intellectual response to the challenge of modernization, the controversy on Confucian religiosity has always been dictated by non-religious themes which have to do with the socio-political and cultural-moral concerns of the Chinese intellectuals. Both Kang Youwei's *kongjiao* (Confucian religion) movement and the May Fourth intellectuals' counter effort can be explained in terms of these non-religious agendas. The resurging discussion in the recent two decades is still focused on social and cultural problems, though many scholars have started to draw methodological inspiration from Western religious theories. However, the school of New Confucianism differs from any other approaches to the question of Confucian religiosity by its non-rhetorical position—that is, it does not merely pay lip service to the issue of Confucian religiousness, but rather reflects the question of modernity in light of Confucian transcendence. For the New

Confucian scholars, both the problem of modernization and the problem of modernity need to be coherently addressed with regard to the spirit of Chinese culture, namely, the Confucian ideal of *neisheng waiwang*, because social and political reforms would not be sustainable without moral and spiritual justifications.⁴⁷⁴

It has been widely observed by historians that when a society undergoes rapid and subversive changes, a crisis of cultural identity arises as people are inundated by new experiences and feel cut off from their own past. The anxiety to reestablish a meaningful continuity with the past becomes all the more intense and acute when the disintegration of tradition is executed in both chronological and spatial dimensions. Although the crisis of cultural identity in the Chinese experience is of a character typical in all non-Western countries, it has become much more severe and much more excruciating for the Chinese intellectuals who lament China's plunge from the monopolist of a civilization to a humiliated underdog subject to Western powers. In any case, such an emotional complex has compelled many Chinese intellectuals to find psychological compensation in asserting China's cultural equivalence with or superiority to the West.⁴⁷⁵

While the New Confucian persuasion is primarily phrased in the framework of the question about modernity, its underlying concern pivots rather on the question about the value and relevance of Chinese culture in the modern age. The New Confucian scholars have always committed themselves to interpreting Chinese tradition in ways that could accommodate modern Western values such as science and democracy. Meanwhile, they have also repeatedly stressed the uniqueness of Chinese civilization in comparison with other major civilizations in the world, Western civilization in particular, by insisting on

⁴⁷⁴ Zheng Jiadong, *Duanlie zhong de Chuantong*, p.243.

⁴⁷⁵ Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, xxvii-xxxiii.

the continuity and longevity of the Chinese cultural tradition.⁴⁷⁶ However, their attempt to score the problem of modernization and the problem of modernity with a single strike—their holistic interpretation of Neo-Confucian ideals of *neisheng waiwang* and *tianren heyi*—seems too ambitious and too spurious to attract a sizable audience. Not only the ethico-political ideal of *neisheng waiwang* cannot command the task of implanting science and democracy and that of reestablishing cultural identity, which often take on different and conflicting paths, in a coherent and organismic fashion; but the moral-spiritual ideal of *tianren heyi* also can hardly conciliate the metaphysical notion of transcendence in humanity with the cultural and historical sense of Chineseness.

As the defining power of traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism has penetrated and integrated every dimension of the social fabric as a seamless totality. What qualifies New Confucianism as the inheritor of the Confucian tradition is also what sets it apart from other intellectual schools in modern China, that is, its organismic vision on modern problems. But the conflict between its approach to the question of humanity in a transcendental sense and to the question of Chineseness in a cultural and historical sense has become increasingly a theoretical liability. In fact, whenever the second question is concerned, the New Confucian scholars have always come to cultural and historical terms for rescue, leaving their universalistic persuasion of Confucian transcendence behind. According to New Confucianism, “religion not only has to do with the inner feeling of individuals, but also bears the objective responsibility of cultural creation.”⁴⁷⁷ While a person’s faith is a matter of free choice, every Chinese must hold a sympathetic attitude towards the Confucian tradition:

⁴⁷⁶ Chang Hao, “New Confucianism and the Intellectual Crisis of Contemporary China,” in Charlotte Furth, ed., *The Limits of Change* (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.279.

⁴⁷⁷ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhaxue de Tezhi*, p.92.

The freedom of faith is one thing, which cannot be interfered with. However, born as a Chinese, one must strive to be a Chinese self-consciously, existentially. This is a matter of personal choice rather than a matter of the freedom of faith. As far as personal choice is concerned, we should always bear this in mind and try to safeguard Confucianism as our cultural identity.⁴⁷⁸

In addition to the conflict between generality and particularity, there exists another problem in the theoretical orientation of New Confucianism: its inability to resolve the dilemma of approaching tradition as a daily inspiration and as academic resources, a problem that only emerged when China was transformed from a Confucian society to a post-Confucian one. During its history of more than two thousand years, Confucianism did not evolve towards developing a thread of speculative philosophy comparable to ancient Greek philosophy. The vitality of Confucianism as a living tradition basically resided in its emphasis on practice rather than theory, on intuition rather than speculation, as was most explicitly registered by the Neo-Confucian ideal of *zhixing heyi* (the unity of knowledge and behavior).⁴⁷⁹ The Neo-Confucian emphasis on the intuitive and empathic mode of thinking has been further articulated in the theoretical construction of New Confucianism, for which the real import of Confucianism as the “religion of moral cultivation” (*chengde zhi jiao*)⁴⁸⁰ consists in achieving the infinite and the perfect out of the finite existence of human kind. The ultimate reality—the source of the meaning of life—can only be seized as a personal, immediate, and transcendent experience by an exercise of intuitive and empathic mind, or in New Confucian terms, *tiren* (experiential

⁴⁷⁸ Mou Zongsan, “Cong Rujia de Dangqian Shiming Shuo Zhongguo Wenhua de Xiandai Yiyi,” *Shidai yu Ganshou* (Taipei: Ehu Chubanshe, 1984).

⁴⁷⁹ The doctrine of *zhixing heyi* was established by Wang Yangming (1472-1528), and was fundamental to the philosophy of the Mind School of neo-Confucianism.

⁴⁸⁰ Mou Zongsan, *Xingti yu Xingti*, p.6.

recognition) and *zhenghui* (understanding through personal witness).⁴⁸¹ Therefore, the quintessence of the Confucian moral-spiritual system, according to the New Confucian scholars, is its focus on practice and experience, whereas the theoretical construction is not endowed with primary significance.

Ironically, the development of New Confucianism since the 1950s has taken on a path undermining its own claim of orientation to practice and experience. The general tendency of the school, as Zheng Jiadong has noticed, is increasingly characterized by its inclination to academize (*xueyuan hua*) and epistemize (*zhishi hua*) the intellectual heritage of the Confucian tradition.⁴⁸² As a consequence, New Confucianism has actually become an “-ology” exclusive to the academic circle, shifting its focus from experiential recognition to metaphysics, from moral cultivation to theoretical perfection. In the end, an academized and epistemized Confucianism would stray from the real spirit of its own—the constant striving to achieve sagehood and the unity of heaven and humanity, and thus violate its nature of “being both philosophy and religion at once” (*ji zhexue ji zongjiao*).⁴⁸³ The reality that today’s Confucianism “seems more a philosophy than a religion”⁴⁸⁴—if “philosophy” here is understood as a form of thinking, and “religion” a living tradition—suggests that Confucianism has been deprived of its role of daily inspiration and has lost its touch with the contemporary society. This is certainly a far cry from the New Confucian commitment to reestablishing the cultural identity of China amid the totalistic dissolution of tradition.

⁴⁸¹ Chang Hao, “New Confucianism and the Intellectual Crisis of Contemporary China,” p.285.

⁴⁸² Zheng Jiadong, *Duanlie zhong de Chuantong*, p.293.

⁴⁸³ The phrase “*ji zhexue ji zongjiao*” was first used by Liang Shuming to describe the nature of Buddhism. It was also applied to Confucianism by later generations of New Confucian scholars. A similar phrase is “*ji daode ji zongjiao*” (being both morality and religion at once). Both phrases are used to illustrate the nature of Confucianism as being somewhere between philosophy, morality, and religion. See Zheng Jiadong, *Duanlie zhong de Chuantong*, p.250.

⁴⁸⁴ Hans Kung, Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p.89.

For the New Confucian scholars, the predicament is not that Confucianism cannot be approached as a form of philosophy, nor is it that epistemological principles and categories cannot be applied to the study of Confucian thinking. The problem is rather that, during a time when tradition has been effectively disengaged from the social reality, putting all the stakes in philosophizing Confucianism would detrimentally undermine their own commitment and orientation. Despite its attempt to cling to the Neo-Confucian methods of *tiren* and *zhenghui*, New Confucianism is steadily and hopelessly drifting away from the spirit it claims adhering to. It is not likely that the New Confucian scholars are unaware of the problems entrenched in their approach to Confucianism. In fact, their phrasing of the Neo-Confucian notion of *daotong*, or, the “orthodox tradition of the way,”⁴⁸⁵ can be seen as a carefully orchestrated project to bypass, if not confront, their methodical limitation in solving the conflicts between generality and particularity, between theory and practice. The term of *daotong*, which is believed to have been coined by the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi (1130-1200), was traditionally employed as a strategy to confirm certain Confucians as true transmitters of the way and exclude others for catering to heterodox teachings.⁴⁸⁶ The New Confucian scholars’ adoption of the discourse of *daotong* is intended not only to identify their intellectual and spiritual affiliation with Neo-Confucianism, but also to propagate their understanding of Chinese culture and tradition in a more general sense.

The New Confucian notion of *daotong* is often used in association with two other terms, *zhengtong* (the orthodox tradition of governance) and *xuetong* (the orthodox

⁴⁸⁵ John Makeham translates *daotong* as the “interconnecting thread of the way,” which, like many other translations, does not grasp the key connotation of “orthodoxness” embodied in the term. See John Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.56, 57.

⁴⁸⁶ Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism*, p.58.

tradition of learning). According to Mou Zongsan, while traditional Chinese culture had developed neither *zhengtong* nor *xuetong*, it did produce a rich and vibrant *daotong*.⁴⁸⁷ But what Mou really means by the term *daotong* is subject to various interpretations, and this ambiguity remains a strong challenge to the New Confucian persuasion. In a move to distance his mentor, Qian Mu, from the camp of New Confucianism, Yu Yingshi has distinguished the “philosopher’s notion of *daotong*” (*zhexuejia de daotong guan*)—in his sense, the New Confucian notion—from the “intellectual historian’s notion of *daotong*” (*sixiangshijia de daotong guan*).⁴⁸⁸ However, it is more often than not that both Qian Mu and Yu Yingshi are regarded as members rather than as outsiders of the New Confucian School. More importantly, the two senses of *daotong*, metaphysical or philosophical vs. historical and cultural, are usually intermingled and cannot be unequivocally differentiated from each other.

The New Confucian establishment of *daotong* can be attributed as early as to Xiong Shili, one of the founding figures of the school, but it is in the Manifesto of 1958 that the doctrine of *daotong* attains its formal endorsement. The term of *daotong* is used in two different occasions in the text of Manifesto. In the first place, it is employed by the co-authors to emphasize the “singularity” (*yi ben xing*) of Chinese culture as in comparison with the diversity of Western culture:

This “singularity” is what is referred to as Chinese culture. In its origins, it is a single system. This single stem (*yi ben*) does not deny its many roots. This is analogous to the situation in ancient China where there were different cultural areas. This did not, however, impede the main thread of its single line of transmission (*yimai xiangcheng zhi tongxu*). The Yin overthrew the mandate of the Xia yet continued the Xia culture, and the Zhou overthrew the mandate of the Yin yet continued the Yin culture, thus constituting the unified succession and

⁴⁸⁷ Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi* (Moral Idealism) (Taichung: Donghai Daxue Chubanshe, 1959), pp.152-157.

⁴⁸⁸ Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun* (Theses on Modern Confucianism) (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), p.191.

continuity of the cultures of the three dynasties. After this, the Qin succeeded the Zhou, the Han succeeded the Qin, and right up to the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, even though politically there were periods of division and unity, overall the constant way (*chang dao*) was that of great unity. Moreover, the periods of political division and unity never adversely affected the general convergent trend of China's culture and thought. This is what is referred to as the successive transmission of the orthodox tradition of the way (*daotong*).⁴⁸⁹

This primary usage of *daotong* in the Manifesto can be understood as referring to the “single line of transmission” of Chinese culture rather than the identification of a specific lineage of intellectual tradition, as in the traditional Neo-Confucian sense. It concerns the continuity and integrity of Chinese culture as a whole, and leans towards Yu Yingshi's sense of “intellectual historian's notion of *daotong*.” The understanding of *daotong* as the essence of Chinese culture is further stressed by the Manifesto, “the doctrine of *daotong* in Chinese history and culture is probably not something modern Chinese and Westerners would like to hear about. But regardless of whether they like it or not, this is the reality in Chinese history. This reality is attributable to the singularity of Chinese culture.”⁴⁹⁰

The historical and cultural sense of *daotong* has been further developed in the New Confucian scholars' functionalist approach to religion and morality. For them, the significance of Confucianism as the Chinese *daotong* is analogous to the fact that “the Western *daotong* resides in Christianity.”⁴⁹¹ Hence, religion and morality are no longer the matters of personal behavior or choice, but rather are imposed with the meaning of cultural identity and continuity. In other words, the New Confucian scholars address the question of *daotong*, that is, the question of Chinese cultural identity, in terms of a

⁴⁸⁹ Tang Junyi, *Zhonghua Renwen yu Dangjin Shijie* (Chinese Humanities and the Contemporary World) (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 1975), pp.876-877; translation quoted in Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism*, p.62.

⁴⁹⁰ Tang Junyi, *Zhonghua Renwen yu Dangjin Shijie*, p.877.

⁴⁹¹ Mou Zongsan, *Shengming de Xuewen* (Learning of Life) (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1970), p.61.

functionalist understanding of religion. This orientation can be clearly seen in Mou Zongsan's statement:

Generally speaking, religion can be approached from two different aspects: first, the creation of personality, i.e., the striving to become a saint, a sage, a Buddha, or a Christian; second, the creation of history and culture, such as Chinese culture, Indian culture, and Western Christian culture, etc. (including both the particularity and generality of a culture). Nowadays people tend to understand religion only from a personal perspective. This is certainly not complete. Religion not only has to do with the inner feeling of individuals, but also bears the objective responsibility of cultural creation.⁴⁹²

While the historical and cultural sense of *daotong* focuses on the transmission and continuity of Chinese culture, the philosophical sense of *daotong* is rather dedicated to exploring the essence and ontology of the Confucian learning. Specifically, it refers to the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian doctrine of *xin-xing*, or, the learning of mind and nature. Like the traditional Neo-Confucian employment of *daotong*, it concerns the metaphysical and religio-ethical significance of the way that has been personally experienced and recorded in specific teachings by past Confucian sages and philosophers. This philosophical or metaphysical understanding of *daotong* is also indicated in the Manifesto of 1958:

What the Ancient Script Edition of the Book of History calls the “sixteen-word message cultivating the mind” (*shiliu zhi xiangchuan zhi xinfa*) as handed down from the Three Emperors is doubtlessly inauthentic, yet the very fact that later scribes should have committed such a counterfeiting and that Sung-Ming Confucian scholars firmly upheld it as the fountain head (*daotong*) of China's cultural development demonstrates their belief that “hsin-hsing” (*xin-xing*) is the root of Chinese thought.⁴⁹³

Because of the New Confucian scholars' intellectual and spiritual affiliation with Neo-Confucianism, it is safe to say that the doctrine of *xin-xing* is also upheld by the Manifesto as the root of Chinese thought. This position can be further confirmed in Mou Zongsan's statement about *dexing zhi xue* (learning of the moral nature)—another term

⁴⁹² Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhaxue de Tezhi*, p.92.

⁴⁹³ Tang Junyi, *Zhonghua Renwen yu Dangjin Shijie*, pp.884-885; translation quoted in Carson Chang, *Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962), vol. 2, p.461.

for *xin-xing*—“China’s tradition of *dexing zhi xue* is called *daotong*.”⁴⁹⁴ Here, the notion of *daotong* appeals to the identification of a specific lineage of the Neo-Confucian metaphysics. According to this philosophical notion of *daotong*, whether certain Confucians in history had incarnated *daoti* (the body of the way)—that is, whether they are true transmitters of the way—is judged on the basis of their understanding and experiential recognition of the doctrine of *xin-xing*:

Chinese Confucianism traces its main lineage to Confucius and Mencius. Accordingly, the heart of this great tradition of Chinese thought rests firmly in the high regard that it accords to subjectivity (*zhutixing*). It is also because of this that Chinese thought can be broadly termed learning of the mind and nature (*xin-xing zhi xue*). Here “the mind” stands for “moral subjectivity” (*daode de zhutixing*). . . . This is the nucleus of Chinese thought and so Mencius is in the orthodox lineage of the learning of the mind and nature.⁴⁹⁵

Although the metaphysical sense of *daotong* is often disputed by New Confucian scholars due to their different understandings of *xin-xing*, *daoti*, and other concepts, there is a general agreement that the orthodox transmission of the doctrine of *xin-xing* had been frequently interrupted throughout history: it was passed down from the sage kings and ministers of the ancient time to Confucius, and on to Mencius; after Mencius it was interrupted till the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the Northern Song period; after the Ming Dynasty, it was disrupted again for three hundred years, only to be rehabilitated by New Confucianism in the modern time.⁴⁹⁶ This understanding of *daotong* recognizes only a few sages in Chinese history as having incarnated *daoti*—the body of the way, hence imposing the Confucian philosophy with a strong sense of elitism. More importantly, it assigns the New Confucian scholars the sole authority to judge who should or should not be included in the lineage of *daotong*. It is thus no surprise that this New

⁴⁹⁴ Mou Zongsan, *Shengming de Xuewen* (The Learning of Life) (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1970), p.61.

⁴⁹⁵ Mou Zongsan, *Zhongguo Zhexue de Tezhi*, pp.66-67; translation quoted in Makeham, ed., *New Confucianism*, p.63.

⁴⁹⁶ Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun*, p.202.

Confucian inclination to identify the fragile transmission of the doctrine of *xin-xing* has been constantly criticized for its orthodoxy and exclusivity.

It should be noted, however, that the more severe problem with the New Confucian concept of *daotong* has to do with the methodological position by which it is constructed. By appealing to the notion of *daotong*, the New Confucian scholars are determined to transcend the conflicts of generality vs. particularity and of theory vs. practice in their approach to the problem of modernity. But ironically, the construction of the concept of *daotong* itself is plagued by the theoretical tension between the historico-cultural and the philosophical orientations. As Yu Yingshi has pointed out, the New Confucian approach to *daotong* can be assuredly regarded as philosophical, yet the metaphysical premise of *daotong* is established upon the religious processing of *tiren* (experiential recognition) and *zhenghui* (understanding through personal witness).⁴⁹⁷ In other words, experiential recognition of the existence of *daoti* and *xin-xing* is a precondition for the philosophical establishment of *daotong*, a process that is beyond the verification of philosophy.

Yu Yingshi's criticism of the New Confucian approach to *daotong* would probably strike a consonance from Fang Zhaohui, who argues that modern Confucian learning is saturated with religious aspirations. The New Confucian emphasis on cultivation, practice, and experience, Fang contends, should be approached in terms of religious significance rather than philosophical values. When the moral-spiritual ideal of *tianren heyi* (the unity of heaven and human) is regarded as a philosophical attribute of the Confucian learning, it would become an epistemological principle and thus fail in its commitment to cultivation and practice. By the same token, the doctrine of *zhixing heyi* (the unity of knowledge and behavior) is neither a philosophical attribute nor a unique

⁴⁹⁷ Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun*, p.203.

feature of the Confucian learning. As a matter of fact, Christianity, Chinese Buddhism, and Taoism all share a common religious feature with the Confucian tradition, that is, their primary emphasis on *xing* (behavior) rather than *zhi* (knowledge). The fundamental problem of modern Confucian learning, Fang Zhaohui believes, is that it has mistakenly forced itself into the paradigm of Western philosophy, hence alienating itself from its own ideals of *tianren heyi*, *zhixing heyi*, etc., which are affiliated with religious implications.⁴⁹⁸

Both Yu Yingshi's and Fang Zhaohui's attacks would deliver sizable blows to the New Confucian indulgence in a holistic and organismic reconstruction of Confucianism during an age in which it never feels at home. The ambition to bridge the gaps between tradition and modernity, between things native and foreign seems to have outpaced its capability. If New Confucianism can be seen as some form of continuation of tradition, it should be understood in the sense that it has actually carried on the spirit of *xuetong* (the orthodox tradition of learning) rather than that of *daotong*, as it usually claims. The New Confucian inclination to identify the orthodox transmission of the way is nothing more than a self-intoxicating device to make the dead tradition look alive. Philosophizing *daotong* would eventually kill *daotong*. If it is ever possible to resurrect *daotong*, what is really needed is not "lip service" between the lines, but rather, so to speak, "limb service" outside the sphere of comfortable study. This is, however, beyond the shooting range of the New Confucian fellows.

⁴⁹⁸ Fang Zhaohui, "Cong Ruxue de Zongjiaoxing Kan Zhongguo Zhexue de Suowei Tedian" (A Look into the So-called Attributes of Chinese Philosophy by Reflecting on the Religiosity of Confucian Learning), *Fudan Daxue Xuebao* (The Fudan University Journal), no. 3, 2002; also in www.confucius2000.com.

A Hermeneutic Reading of the Confucian Tradition

The Western influence on modern China had been largely exerted in a cascaded pattern: starting from guns and ships, expanding to ideas about science and democracy, then to specific systems and institutions, and finally to various philosophies and beliefs. This pattern of intrusion also affected the way Confucianism as an established institution was disintegrated. Yu Yingshi has once suggested that, if the Confucian tradition could be divided into two dimensions—*xing er shang* (metaphysical) and *xing er xia* (physical, institutional), then the impingement of Western culture was mainly upon its *xing er xia* dimension.⁴⁹⁹ It is this *xing er xia* challenge of Confucianism that had delivered drastic changes to the political, social, ethical, and economic values of Chinese society. A study on the *xing er xia* dimension would shed light on the understanding of how the reception of Western culture in Chinese society correlated to the transformation of Confucian values. From this perspective, the biggest problem of the New Confucian approach to modernity has to be attributed to its loss of touch with society, thanks to its exclusive focus on the *xing er shang* (metaphysics). To be sure, the socially blind approach of New Confucianism was the only surviving persuasion in propagating Chinese culture during a time of antitraditionalism; yet as far as the post-Confucian social reality is concerned, it has increasingly appeared to be one step short of reaching the modern spirit.

With the rapid waning of Marxism in recent decades, Chinese society seems to have found balance in a combination of paradoxes: material Westernization marching hand in hand with spiritual nationalism. On the one hand, there is the ever-deepening process of

⁴⁹⁹ Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun*, p.8. The terms of *xing er shang* and *xing er xia* originally came from *Zhou Yi* (the Book of Changes), “what is of *xing er shang* is called the ‘Way’; what is of *xing er xia* is called the ‘vessel’.” In Chinese philosophy they are often used to express the relation of generality to particularity, essence to phenomenon, abstract laws to concrete things, and so on.

Westernization that still delivers changes to economy, politics, education, life style, literature, arts, etc.; on the other, there is a growing inclination to look into traditional resources for ideological inspirations. Since the totalistic disintegration of Confucianism has denied Chinese society access to a centralized value system, the form of spiritual nostalgia is often facilitated in a diffused and divergent fashion. While the majority of the population clings to certain folk practices in which they might find sources of meaning, more and more intellectuals have showed academic interest in and spiritual affinity with Chinese classical studies. As a consequence, Confucianism and other related traditional scholarship have been elevated to a lofty status called *guoxue*, or the “state learning.” This special spectrum of classical studies endorses a nationalist emphasis and research orientation in the humanities, and embraces “a general but unfounded concern about applying Western theories to Chinese materials and persists in advocating the traditional Chinese philology and exegetics which prevailed in the Qing dynasty.”⁵⁰⁰

The ideological stake in Chinese classical studies is anything but compromising. During an age when Chinese tradition has retreated from the central stage of society to the aloof reservoir of academies, it is no surprise that *guoxue* is entrusted with a “holy” mission of safeguarding the “national spirit,” so far an autonomous region which is virtually irrelevant to the process of modernization. This nationalistic nature of *guoxue* dictates that academic activities occur on the emotional and volitional planes alongside the philological and exegetical. But the price for this kind of expedition is always high. The failure to release scholarship from the bondage of nationalistic persuasion would put

⁵⁰⁰ Li You-Zheng, *Epistemological Problems of the Comparative Humanities: A Semiotic/Chinese Perspective* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), p.269.

both the integrity of national spirit and the credibility of “state learning” at risk. Li You-Zheng has certainly spotted such a double jeopardy:

Throughout the all-embracing materialistic process of westernization chosen by the Chinese nation, the emphasis on the orthodoxy of the spiritual ‘state learning’ colludes with materialism. This collusion may be called ‘double covering,’ since it has effectively covered a double absence in modern Chinese society and culture: the absence of the spiritual dimension within the westernizing movement and the absence of innovation of traditional scholarship.⁵⁰¹

The relevance of Confucianism in contemporary China should be understood in terms of the correlation between a living tradition and the scholarship that derives from it. The tension of the theoretical orientation of New Confucianism with its potential for social engagement poses a constant challenge to understanding the problem of modernity from a culturally relevant perspective. For the Chinese, the way to approach the question of tradition is also the way to understand the problem of modernity. The termination of Confucianism as an institutional establishment has constituted not only ontological implications but also existential significance for the unfolding of modern Chinese history. Hence, a hermeneutic reading of the significance of Confucianism in modern Chinese society needs to be engaged in this perspective. At this point, it is worthwhile to turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of philosophical hermeneutics, especially his theory of hermeneutics of tradition, to reflect on the problem of meaning actualized specifically in the Chinese experience.

According to Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics, tradition only exists in the process of continuous transmutation because the historical life of tradition consists in its capacity for being brought into an ever-new process of assimilation through interpretation.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Li You-Zheng, *Epistemological Problems of the Comparative Humanities*, p.273.

⁵⁰² See George de Schrijver, “Hermeneutics and Tradition,” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 19 (Spring 1982), p.34.

Gadamer's concept of tradition is deprived of static connotations. He does not limit his hermeneutical task to the act of reviving the cultural formulations and "objectifications" of the past by means of "subjective understanding" and empathy. Gadamer's concern is rather with the process of future-oriented development⁵⁰³ which characterizes the advance of human history. In light of this future-oriented advance, Gadamer has sought to account for the way in which we transmit and reformulate our value system inherited from the past. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer engages this perspective with the important concept of prejudice because without which understanding is impossible. For Gadamer, the notion of tradition is the basis of all "prejudices" and of everything that is transmitted to us. Thus in order to clarify and evaluate our prejudices it is essential that we comprehend the tradition we live in. When interpreting a text, the interpreter must visit and understand the past; he/she must become aware of the influence of tradition upon him/herself and the communality that exists between him/herself and tradition. In Gadamer's view, tradition is part of us; we live in it. If we regard ourselves as historical beings, our efforts should not be directed at distancing ourselves from tradition which constitutes our historicity, but at elevating tradition back to its full value in order to appreciate the significance it holds for us.⁵⁰⁴

Gadamer's stance appears to be in sharp opposition to the legacy of Enlightenment that has constantly exhibited aversion to authority and tradition. He believes that the absolute opposition Enlightenment creates between authority and reason is misleading. For him, authority does not always entail the unreasonable exercise of force and

⁵⁰³ De Schrijver, "Hermeneutics and Tradition," p.33.

⁵⁰⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), pp.245-253.

domination; “authority is not always wrong.”⁵⁰⁵ Gadamer asserts that the key relationship to authority depends on whether or not we accept it. Specifically, if we recognize in authority “superiority in knowledge” and insight, then we accept authority of our own accord; otherwise, any other acceptance would be based on force which must be distinguished from free acceptance and recognition. Gadamer’s historical hermeneutics recommends a discard of the abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and knowledge. “The effect of a living tradition and the effect of historical study must constitute a unity, the analysis of which would reveal only a texture of reciprocal relationships.”⁵⁰⁶ Thus tradition and historical study should be a unity instead of an antithesis. In other words, historical study cannot exist without the existence of tradition, and the sense of tradition is also materialized in historical study’s dialogical rehabilitation of the past.

In the scholarship of and about Confucianism, there are two typical problems in dealing with the reciprocal relationship between tradition and historical study. The first one is to treat tradition as no more than historical documents or dead texts, as is the case of Joseph Levenson. This historicist position is sanctioned by the Enlightenment notion that the antithesis between tradition and modernity, between authority and reason is absolute and irreconcilable. Hence, tradition belongs to the past and has no place in the present and future; it only comes to our attention when it serves as a non-interactive object in historical study. Accordingly, Confucianism is conceived as containing no values or truths compatible to the standards of modernity, and the historical study of the Confucian tradition is aimed merely at aesthetic and psychological gratification. While

⁵⁰⁵ Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutics,” in David E. Linge, tr. & ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (University of California Press, 1976), p.33.

⁵⁰⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.251.

this approach might shed light on the understanding of the historical evolution of institutional Confucianism, it is unable to recognize the philosophical and religio-ethical dimension of Confucianism which is inherent in the Chinese understanding of modernity.

The other typical problem in the Confucianism scholarship is to see historical study as the living tradition per se, as is manifest in the theoretical position of Yuan Weishi.⁵⁰⁷ In his article “Literature Revolution and Controversies about Anti-traditionalism,” Yuan rejects the notion that there is a break between tradition and modernity, as maintained by Chang Hao, Lin Yu-Sheng and Tu Wei-ming. He asserts that neither the abolishment of the Confucian examination system nor the New Culture movement⁵⁰⁸ had severed the connection between the present and the past. By appealing to the abstract dichotomy of “little tradition” (*xiao chuantong*) and “great tradition” (*da chuantong*), Yuan denies Confucianism as having ever served as a mainstream tradition in Chinese history. For him it is actually the folk practices that constituted the flow of history. From Yuan’s point of view, the connection between the present and the past has never been cut off. Hence, with the establishment of new (Western) educational system and the increase of literacy in modern time, people’s access to traditional classics would only be broadened rather than the opposite.

It is evident that Yuan Weishi’s optimistic interpretation of the continuity between tradition and modernity is based upon his “grass-root” approach to the notion of tradition. According to Yuan, since Confucianism was just one of the many constituents in making up the bulk of tradition, its institutional dissolution would not pose a threat to the survival

⁵⁰⁷ See Yuan Weishi, “Wenxue Geming yu Fanchuantong de Shishi Feifei” (Literature Revolution and Controversies about Anti-traditionalism), in <http://mysixiang.myetang.com>.

⁵⁰⁸ Closely associated with the May Fourth movement, the New Culture movement (1915-1919) focused on transforming the classical, elite literature to a modern, vernacular literature.

of tradition as a whole. He believes that the “illusionary” notion that there is a “break” between tradition and modernity is caused by two factors. The first factor is that with changed situations in the modern time, people could no longer only study the Four Books and Five Classics, or any other ancient texts, but would have to master science and technology to survive. It would be absurd to let people go back into the “cultural poverty” and “ideological domination” of the medieval period.⁵⁰⁹

The second factor contributing to the sense of discontinuity, Yuan contends, is that since modern societies are all striving for diversity, Chinese people would also embrace various ingredients from tradition to serve their needs. In other words, there are no universal rules on how a tradition should be kept, since people have different ways to engage tradition.⁵¹⁰ Evidently, Yuan’s optimistic interpretation of the actual situation of Chinese tradition is based more on theoretical construction than on observation. He not only has dishonestly downplayed the historical significance of Confucianism, but also fails to identify the problem of modernity which the spread of science and technology would never be able to address. It is true that Confucianism survives as some kind of scholarship in the philosophy department of several universities, but historical study would never fill the void left by a living tradition. The New Confucian scholars are trying to bring the two dimensions to an integrated vision, yet their calling is hardly heard outside the ivory tower.

In his *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, James M. Gustafson argues that no Church or denomination could afford to be careless about its continuity with the past, on penalty of

⁵⁰⁹ Yuan Weishi, “Wenxue Geming yu Fanchuantong de Shishi Feifei.”

⁵¹⁰ Yuan Weishi, “Wenxue Geming yu Fanchuantong de Shishi Feifei.”

weakening the sense of its distinctive social identity.⁵¹¹ An organized religion cannot survive if it fails to keep alive its “common memory” by means of rituals, religious customs, catechetics, liturgical and moral preaching, prayers, etc. It is thus imperative for a congregation to engage periodically in the rehearsal of its past salvation history, for this rehearsal is of such a nature that it bears upon the “basic trust” looked for in religion. Religion’s span of life extends across the lifetimes of generations, so the longevity of its heritage and message is able to provide an unassailable support for individuals and groups caught in the vicissitudes of history. By rehearsing and internalizing their religious heritage, people seek to relate their lives to the experiences of “stability” and “certainty” bestowed upon them by religion.

A hermeneutic understanding of the Confucian tradition should be carried out on condition that we acknowledge the specific character of Confucianism and its particular need to maintain a “dialogical continuity” with the formulations of its past. Gustafson’s theory about the significance of continuity in maintaining a tradition certainly has a bearing on the understanding of the contemporary relevance of Confucianism. The latest development of the controversy on Confucian religiosity has showed an inclination to move in Gustafson’s direction, that is, to establish the continuity of tradition by appealing to the “common memory.” Although most participants in the controversy are engaged in a historical evaluation of Confucianism in terms of philosophy or religion, the real intention of many scholars is to find the right spot for Confucianism in the matrix of modernity. For some, this right spot happens to be called “religion.”⁵¹² Therefore, the

⁵¹¹ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp.42-85.

⁵¹² For example, Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang, Chen Ming, and Peng Yongjie have taken such a position in the controversy on Confucian religiosity. See Chapter II of this dissertation, pp.94-96.

challenge of bringing Confucianism to the creation of meaning in the modern age is not as much about theoretical construction as about reestablishing a living tradition closely connected with social reality.

Yu Yingshi has used the word *youhun* (wandering ghost) to describe the reality of Confucianism in the modern time, meaning that it had been uprooted from the soil of society. The only possibility for Confucianism to regain its social value, Yu asserts, is to “engage in daily practice” (*riyong changxing hua*, or, *renlun riyong hua*).⁵¹³ To achieve that prospect, Confucianism must not confine itself to a discourse of morality or to a philosophy of religion exclusive to the academic circle. This vision is shared by a number of scholars. After observing the “socially relevant Buddhism” in Taiwan, John Berthrong has reiterated an issue confronting all New Confucian scholars: whether they can “move out from their academic posts in order to provide a Confucian interpretation of modern life that will have real appeal to modern and East Asian peoples?”⁵¹⁴ John Makeham also believes that the possible future of “a socially relevant Confucianism” rests on a small but growing group of people “who have been calling for ‘secularized’ and grass-roots forms of Confucianism.”⁵¹⁵

Interestingly, the calling for the “secularization” of Confucianism has had a long-time play in the modern history of China, except that it was under the name of “religion.” In fact, Kang Youwei’s failed Confucian religion movement has passed down a very humble legacy: two overseas branches of his Confucian church, one in Hong Kong and one in Indonesia, have survived the vicissitudes of history. The Hong Kong branch, with the name of Kongjiao Xueyuan (Academy of the Confucian Religion), propagates

⁵¹³ Yu Yingshi, *Xiandai Ruxue Lun*, p.5.

⁵¹⁴ John H. Berthrong, *Transformations of the Confucian Way* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), p.205.

⁵¹⁵ Makeham, *New Confucianism*, p.72.

Confucianism as a “humanistic religion” (*rendao de zongjiao*), in the sense that it is a teaching of ethics and morality; it is a religion of the “human way,” as in comparison to religions of the “divine way.”⁵¹⁶ Moreover, it is dedicated to spreading the humanistic teachings of Confucius with an appeal to institutional establishments on the model of Christianity. The Indonesian branch of the Confucian church has taken a slightly different path. During the first two decades of the 20th century, it developed into an organized religion under the auspices of MATAKIN (the Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia).⁵¹⁷ Many members of the Confucian church tend to regard it as a true religion and have a belief in a transcendental God (*tian*) with Confucius as a Prophet.

Although both the Confucian academy in Hong Kong and the Confucian church in Indonesia are largely marginalized and have little if any influence on modern Chinese consciousness, their very survival as an explanatory system for meaning and as a benchmark for cultural identity would shed important light on the understanding of the question on Confucian religiosity. As the Chinese scholar Chen Ming has pointed out, the controversy on Confucian religiosity needs to be approached in two different angles: whether Confucianism was a religion in a historical sense, and whether it should or not be reconstructed as “a religion” in the context of modernity.⁵¹⁸ Probably this is what the controversy was all about in the first place. In any case, the meaning of tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience would be better understood in terms of a joint effort, in which the historical and cultural vision manifest in the controversy, the ontological and

⁵¹⁶ Tang Enjia, *Kongxue Lunji* (Collected Papers on the Confucian Learning) (Wenjin Chubanshe, 1996), p.26.

⁵¹⁷ Charles A. Coppel, “The Origins of Confucianism as an Organized Religion in Java, 1900-1923,” in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 1981, pp.179-196.

⁵¹⁸ See Chapter II of this dissertation, pp.94-96.

metaphysical aspiration of New Confucianism, and the existential and practical experience of the Confucian churches all have a fair part.

EPILOGUE

The current dissertation project owes its original inspiration to Yu Yingshi, the retired history professor at Princeton University, who once characterized Confucianism in modern Chinese society as “a wandering ghost,” meaning it has been uprooted from and bears no substantial impact on the social reality. This consciousness of the discontinuity between tradition and modernity in the Chinese experience has ever since motivated the current project, which is intended to reflect on the significance of the controversy on Confucian religiosity to the Chinese self-understanding in the modern age. Specifically, it examines how the Chinese approach to tradition and modernity is conditioned by the way Confucianism is engaged in the Western category of religion.

The controversy on Confucian religiosity has provided both a source and a test case for new ideas about Confucianism and about religion. The epistemological difficulty of defining Confucianism in terms of religion challenges the accepted assumptions and perspectives in formulating both concepts. The shift from Confucian paradigms to the paradigms of modernity in Chinese society determines that the integrity of Confucianism has to be testified no less significantly in the category of religion than in philosophy, ethics, politics, and any other academic disciplines. In the meantime, the resistance of Confucianism to the theorizing effort of the category of religion presents an incisive deconstruction of the latter’s claim to “universal validity and unique truth.” It also suggests the growing constraint of the essentialist understanding of “religion” in cross-cultural studies, and calls for a pragmatic approach to the conceptualization of religion. The validity and utility of any definition of religion should only be recognized with

respect to the fact that it is a conceptual instrument or an analytical tool rather than a manifestation of truth-value.

More importantly, by investigating the historical development of the controversy on Confucian religiosity, the project attempts to illustrate how the controversy has less to do with the academic discipline of religious studies than with the cultural and socio-political concerns of Chinese intellectuals. What is at stake in the controversy is not an academic examination of Confucianism in the Western category of religion, but rather an existential endeavor to explore the possibility and feasibility of reinventing Confucianism in the paradigms of modernity. The question of whether Confucianism is a religion is not so much about its religiosity as about the integrity of Chinese tradition and culture in general. A thorough understanding of the controversy on Confucian religiosity needs to be engaged in light of how Chinese intellectuals have managed to approach the question about tradition and modernity in the post-Confucian context.

The problem of understanding modernity from a Chinese perspective pivots on the question about Chinese cultural identity and about humanity in general as in response to the challenge of modernization. The school of New Confucianism interprets the problem of modernity as how to understand the challenge of modernization in terms of Confucian moral-spiritual symbolism. Specifically, it approaches the problem of modernity by appealing to the neo-Confucian religio-ethical ideals of *neisheng waiwang* (inner sageliness and outer kingliness) and *tianren heyi* (the unity of heaven and human being). But the New Confucian engagement in a holistic and organismic reconstruction of Confucianism is greatly paralyzed by the intrinsic conflicts between generality and particularity, between theory and practice. The adherence to the notion of *daotong* to

bridge the gaps between tradition and modernity and between East and West has not yet delivered the desired results. The theoretical limitation of New Confucianism indicates the general problem of the whole scholarship of *guoxue*, whose nationalistic nature dictates that academic activities occur on the emotional and volitional planes alongside the philological and exegetical. The failure to release Confucianism scholarship from the bondage of nationalistic persuasion would put both the pursuit of national spirit and the credibility of “state learning” at risk.

The contribution of the current dissertation project to the Confucianism scholarship, especially to the understanding of the controversy on Confucian religiosity, can be judged on two counts. First, it has articulated the problems and ambiguity of conceptualizing Confucianism in the category of religion. In particular, it pays special attention to the linguistic “fuzziness” of the terms of *rujia*, *rujiao*, and *ruxue*, which tends to ground the debate on Confucian religiosity in a selective and circular nature. Correspondingly, the project recommends a transcendence of terminological confusion by defining and stipulating folk categories so that the debate on Confucian religiosity can be engaged with epistemological accountability. Second, the current project has also made an original contribution to the scholarship by exploring the epistemological significance of defining Confucianism in the category of religion. So far most participants in the controversy on Confucian religiosity, due to their methodological limitations, have only engaged in textual and historical investigations, and their visions are often compromised by social and political persuasions. It is hoped that by initiating a pragmatic conceptualization of religion, the attempt to define Confucianism in terms of religion can be dissociated from the nationalistic persuasion of safeguarding the “essence” of Chinese culture so that a

cross-cultural understanding in the modern context can be achieved with particular respect to the understanding of Confucian religiosity.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

Pinyin spellings	Other systems	Chinese characters
baijia		百家
Cai Yuanpei	Ts'ai Yuan-p'ei	蔡元培
chang dao		常道
Chen Duxiu	Ch'en Tu-hsiu	陳獨秀
Chen Huanzhang	Ch'en Huan-chang	陳煥章
Chen Ming		陳明
Cheng Huang		城隍
Cheng Zhongying	Cheng Chung-ying	成中英
chengde zhi jiao		成德之教
Chunqiu Fanlu		春秋繁露
Cui Dahua		崔大華
da chuantong		大傳統
dao	tao	道
daode de zhutixing		道德的主體性
daojiao	tao-chiao	道教
daoti		道體
daotong		道統
dexing zhi xue		德性之學
Dong Zhongshu	Tung Chung-shu	董仲舒
Du Weiming	Tu Wei-Ming	杜維明

ertong zongjiao yishi		兒童 宗教 意識
Fang Zhaohui		方 朝 暉
fangbian quanfa		方便 權 法
Feng Youlan	Fung Yu-lan	馮 友 蘭
fenjieshi		分 解 式
fojiao	fo-chiao	佛 教
fu mei		復 魅
guai li luan shen		怪 力 亂 神
Guan Gong		關 公
Guo Qiyong		郭 齊 勇
guoxue		國 學
Han Xing		韓 星
Hanshu		漢 書
He Kerang		何 克 讓
Hengyu		恒 毓
Hu Shi	Hu Shih	胡 適
Huang Junjie		黃 俊 杰
ji		集
ji mei		極 魅
ji zhexue ji zongjiao		即 哲 學 即 宗 教
Jiang Qing		蔣 慶
jiao	chiao	教
jie yi ru jiao		皆 以 儒 教

jing		經
Jinshu		晉書
junzi		君子
junzi ru		君子儒
Kan Ze	K'an Tse	闕澤
Kang Xiaoguang		康曉光
Kang Youwei	K'ang Yu-wei	康有為
kongjiao	k'ung-chiao	孔教
Kongjiao Lun		孔教論
Kongjiao Xueyuan		孔教學院
Kongjiaohui	K'ung-chiao Hui	孔教會
Kongzi	K'ung Tzu	孔子
Kongzi Gaizhi Kao		孔子改制考
Laozi	Lao Tzu	老子
Li Guoquan		李國權
Li Ji	Li Chi	禮記
Li Shen		李申
Li You-Zheng		李幼蒸
Li Zehou		李澤厚
Li Zhizao	Li Chih-tsao	李之藻
Liang Qichao	Liang Ch'I-ch'ao	梁啟超
Liang Shuming	Liang Sou-ming	梁漱溟
Lin Yu-Sheng		林毓生

Liu Shuxian	Liu Shu-hsien	劉述先
Liu Xin		劉歆
lixing		理性
lunli dai zongjiao		倫理代宗教
Lunyu		論語
Mou Zhongjian		牟鐘鑒
Mou Zongsan		牟宗三
neisheng waiwang		內聖外王
nuo		懦
Peng Yongjie		彭永捷
Qian Mu		錢穆
qu mei		去魅
ren	jen	仁
Ren Jiyu		任繼愈
rendao de zongjiao		人道的宗教
renlun riyong hua		人倫日用化
renwen jiao		人文教
riyong changxing hua		日用常行化
rou		柔
ru	ju	儒
rujia		儒家
rujiao		儒教
Rujiao Wenti Zhenglun Ji		儒教問題爭論集

Rujiao Zhiyi		儒教質疑
ruxue		儒學
san jiao		三教
sangang wuchang		三綱五常
shangdi	shang-ti	上帝
shi		史
Shiji		史記
Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiusuo		世界宗教研究所
shiliu zi xiangchuan zhi xinfa		十六字相傳之心法
shu shi		術士
Sima Qian		司馬遷
Sishu		四書
situ zhi guan		司徒之官
sixiangshijia de daotong guan		思想史家的道統觀
taiping dao		太平道
Tang Junyi		唐君毅
tian	t'ien	天
tian dao	t'ien-tao	天道
tian, di, jun, qin, shi		天，地，君，親，師
tianren ganying		天人感應
tianren hede		天人合德
tianren heyi		天人合一
Tianzhu Shiyi		天主實義

tianxia wei gong		天下為公
tiren		體認
Tudi Gong		土地公
wangdao zhengzhi		王道政治
wei zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuany	為中國	文化敬告世界人士宣言
Wen Shi Zhe		文史哲
Wu Yu		吳虞
Wu Yu Wenlu		吳虞文錄
Wudeng Huiyuan		五燈會元
Wujing		五經
Wushu		吳書
Wuzong Shijia		武宗世家
xiantian dao	hsien-t'ien tao	先天道
xiaochuantong		小傳統
xiaoren ru		小人儒
Xin Qingnian		新青年
xin ruxue		新儒學
xing		行
xing er shang		形而上
xing er xia		形而下
xinli		心理
xin-xing	hsin-hsing	心性
xin-xing zhi xue		心性之學

Xiong Shili	Hsiung Shi-li	熊十力
xiushen		修身
Xu Guangqi	Hsu Kuang-ch'I	徐光啟
Xu Shen		許慎
Xuandiji		宣帝紀
xueshu ziyuan		學術資源
xuetong		學統
xueyuan hua		學院化
Xunzi	Hsun Tzu	荀子
Yan Mo		嚴謨
Yang C. K.		楊慶坊
yang jiao		陽教
Yang Tingyun	Yang T'ing-yun	楊庭筠
yi		義
yi ben		一本
yi ben xing		一本性
yimai xiangcheng zhi tongxu		一脈相承之統緒
yin jiao		陰教
yin yang		陰陽
yinyangjia		陰陽家
Yiwenzhi		藝文志
Yongzheng		雍正
youhun		游魂

Youxia Liezhuan		游俠列傳
Yu Dunkang		余敦康
Yu Yingshi	Yu Ying-shi	余英時
Yuan Shikai	Yuan Shih-k'ai	袁世凱
Yuan Weishi		袁偉時
Yuhuang Dadi		玉皇大帝
Zao Jun		灶君
Zhang Dainian		張岱年
Zhang Hao	Chang Hao	張灝
Zhang Jian		張踐
Zhang Qing		章清
Zhang Taiyan	Chang T'ai-yen	章太炎
Zhang Xingyao		張星堯
zhenghui		證會
zhengtong		政統
zhexue dai zongjiao		哲學代宗教
zhexuejia de daotong guan		哲學家的道統觀
zhi		知
zhihui		智慧
zhishi hua		知識化
zhishi ziyuan		知識資源
zhixing heyi		知行合一
Zhongguo Rujiao Shi		中國儒教史

Zhongyong		中庸
zhu renjun, shun yinyang, ming jiaohua		助人君，順陰陽，明教化
Zhu Xi		朱熹
zhutixing		主體性
zi		子
zong	tsung	宗
zonghexing		綜合性
zongjiao	tsung chiao	宗教
zongti xiyong		中體西用
Zongjiao Dacidian		宗教大辭典
zongjiao yu renge		宗教與人格
Zongjing Lu		宗鏡錄

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