

Declare the Independence of Confucianism from the State: *Rethinking “Outer Kingliness” in a Democratic Era*

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Since antiquity, Confucians have sought to work with the state in order to implement their philosophy through state sponsorship. And yet, whenever Confucians have sought state sponsorship, naturally the government has adopted Confucian philosophy selectively to serve its own purposes and thus compromised the integrity of Confucianism. Throughout Chinese history, countless Confucian officials attempted to help rulers to do the right thing. They often failed when their advice went against the fundamental interest of rulers. On reflection, this outcome should not be unexpected. The primary goal of rulers is to solidify power; the primary concern of Confucianism is the wellbeing of the people. When the two conflict, it is highly unlikely for a government to prioritize Confucian ideals. In a democratic era, Confucianism can influence society without joining the state apparatus. It can and must promote its social ideals through grassroots democratic participation rather than leave itself to the mercy of state sponsorship.

* Research for this essay was financially supported by a SSRC grant from Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE2016-SSRTG-0007).

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The state has had a special place in Confucianism. From the beginning, serving the state has been one of its most important themes. The *Great Learning*, one of the Confucian “Four Classics,” advocates the sequential goals of “cultivating one’s person” (*xiushen* 修身), “regulating one’s family” (*qijia* 齊家), “managing the state” (*zhiguo* 治國), and finally “harmonizing the world” (*pingtianxia* 平天下). Under the banner of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness,” generation after generation of Confucian thinkers have tried tirelessly to cultivate themselves as persons and to promote their moral and social ideals through the operation of the state. Confucius himself sought a post in government that would give him a chance to put his philosophy into practice. The *Analects* records a conversation Confucius had with his disciple Zigong 子貢:

Zigong said, “Here is a beautiful gem—Should one wrap it up and store it in a cabinet? Or should one seek a good price and sell it? The Master said, “Sell it! Sell it! I am one waiting for the right offer.” (Ni 2017, 237)

Presumably, here Confucius expressed his wish to be offered a government post so he could realize his political ambitions. In an effort to promote his political agenda, Confucius went to see Nanzi, the notorious wife of the ruler of Wei. His act was so unseemly that even his disciple Zilu found it troubling (*Analects* 6.28). At times, Confucius’s fondness for government affairs puzzled his disciples. One such case is his evaluation of the ancient scholar-official Guan Zhong 管仲. Guan was one of the two teachers of Prince Jiu in the state of Qi 齊. Later Jiu 糾 was killed by his younger brother and the killer became Duke Huan 桓 of Qi. Out of loyalty to the prince, the other teacher of Jiu committed suicide. Guan Zhong, however, not only continued to live but later even became Duke Huan’s prime minister and assisted Duke Huan in establishing a strong Qi state. Guan’s behavior seemed contrary to Confucius’s teachings on loyalty and integrity. In *Analects* 14.16 and 14.17, his disciples Zilu 子路 and Zigong respectively ques-

tioned Guan's moral character. Apparently, they had expected Confucius to think the same way. However, it turned out that Confucius gave Guan a very positive assessment and called him "virtuous" (*ren* 仁). Confucius's justification for his assessment seems entirely consequentialist, on the ground that Guan later did something good. Confucius explained his assessment of Guan Zhong to Zilu:

Duke Huan assembled the Lords of the states together nine times, and did it without using military force. It was all through the influence of Guan Zhong. That was his virtue (*ren*)! That was his virtue (*ren*)! (Ni 2017, 332, modified)

In the following passage 14.17, Confucius explains to Zigong:

Guan Zhong became prime minister to Duke Huan, made him leader of the lords of states, and united and rectified the whole kingdom. Even today, the people still benefit from what he conferred. Had there not been Guan Zhong, we would be wearing our hair unbound with our clothes fastened on the left. How could this be compared to the petty fidelity of common men and women, which would have him strangle himself in a stream or ditch, without anyone knowing who he was? (Ni 2017, 333)

"Wearing our hair unbound with our clothes fastened on the left" connotes backwardness and a lack of culture. Here Confucius seems to imply that, (seemingly) immoral acts are justified in order to achieve greater purposes in politics. However, these remarks are inconsistent with what is recorded in *Analects* 3.22, where Confucius criticizes Guan Zhong as having no sense of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). In the same passage, Confucius also regards Guan Zhong as a person of "small capacity." Such remarks concern Guan's moral character, but obviously Confucius thinks highly of Guan's political capacity and achievements. The contemporary scholar Li Zehou 李澤厚 sees such a discrepancy as exposing a tension and conflict between ethics and politics in the Confucian ideal of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" (Li 2004, 102). Whereas ethics requires one course of action, politics demands another. If we accept Li's reading, it means that Confucius was so much concerned with political success for his social project, that

when ethics and politics conflicted, he opted for politics. At any rate, this story suggests a tension between the Confucian goals of seeking “inner sageliness” and “outer kingliness.” “Inner sageliness” demands moral integrity. “Outer kingliness,” at least in cases like Guan Zhong, calls for compromising moral standards as far as working for the state is concerned.

This issue is related to what we today call the “dirty hands” problem in political philosophy. “Dirty hands” is a term used in political philosophy to describe the necessity at times to engage in immoral acts in order to achieve greater goods in politics. The term was taken from Sartre’s play by the same name. In the play, the communist leader Hoerderer, who intends to collaborate with fascist groups in order to form a coalition government, defends himself with a rhetorical question: “I have dirty hands right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth and blood. Do you think you can govern innocently?” (Sartre 1955, 224). The implied answer is that one cannot govern innocently. Michael Walzer explicates the concept of “dirty hands” as follows, in a more or less affirmative light: “No government can put the life of the community and all its members at risk, so long as there are actions available to it, even immoral actions, that would avoid or reduce the risk. . . . That is what political leaders are for; that is their first task” (Walzer 2004, 42). He declares, “No one succeeds in politics without getting his hands dirty” (Walzer 1973, 164).

One may think that if true Confucians become rulers themselves, things will be different. One may think they will then practice “true” Confucianism. For the sake of argument, let us suppose Confucians can become rulers, with the full intention to implement Confucian ideals. Can they succeed in upholding Confucian ideals and implement them in accordance to their true spirit? I think not. Politics is a pragmatic enterprise. In order to be successful, it requires negotiation, compromise, and, yes, dirty hands. All these will jeopardize the true spirit of Confucianism. In contemporary times, the revered late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew was probably one of the most “Confucian” among all national leaders across the world in the last century. He has been criticized for being ruthless toward his political opponents. In his defense, people may say that he did what was neces-

sary to control power so he could lead the nation towards prosperity (as Guan Zhong did). In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2010, Lee said, "Everybody knows that in my bag I have a hatchet, and a very sharp one. You take me on, I take my hatchet, we meet in the cul-de-sac. That's the way I had to survive in the past."¹ In another interview with *Straits Times* in 2012, Lee defended himself, "I'm not saying that everything I did was right but everything I did was for an honorable purpose. I had to do some nasty things, locking fellows up without trial."² At least Lee had the courage to admit that he used "dirty hands" in advancing his political ideals. And no one can deny that he did it successfully.

Therefore, the dilemma for Confucians in working with the state seems to be this. On the one hand, if Confucians do not get involved with state power, they become marginalized and risk becoming irrelevant. Thus, they cannot achieve their goals by constructing a good society. On the other hand, working with the state jeopardizes the integrity of Confucianism and renders it a tool used by state power for political purposes. When rulers are non-Confucian but make use of Confucianism, they use Confucianism selectively and distort Confucianism in order to serve their own purposes. Even when rulers are somewhat Confucian themselves, it is impossible for them to succeed without compromising the integrity of Confucianism. They have to commit "dirty hands" acts in violation of Confucian teachings in order to make it in politics. Mencius's ideal, that one should never commit an immoral act even if by doing so one could acquire the entire world (*Mencius* 2A2), is simply not a formula for successful politics. Throughout history, the partial success of Confucianism in gaining state sponsorship has come at a high cost. The Han emperor Wudi made Confucianism the state ideology but also made Confucianism a tool for the state, analogous to the idea of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (philosophy is the handmaiden of theology) in the mediaeval West. For instance, by strongly aligning filiality (孝) with

¹ "I did some sharp and hard things to get things right. . .," Andrew Loh's blog, accessed 28 July 2019, <https://andrewlohwp.wordpress.com/2012/09/16/i-did-some-sharp-and-hard-things-to-get-things-right/>.

² *Ibid.*

loyalty (忠), Confucianism was made to serve the interest of rulers in producing submissive subjects for the state. The option of involvement with state power inevitably undermines Confucianism. We may call this the Confucian dilemma of politics.

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Recently, some Confucian scholars have been suspicious about working with the state to realize Confucian ideals. Tang Yijie 湯一介 (1927–2014) opposed politicizing Confucianism. He said, “the politicization of Confucianism may undermine the precious spirit of Confucianism.”³ In his view, “had Confucius become a king, we would not have had Confucius.”⁴ In recent years, the Chinese government has released signals to embrace Confucianism. Some Confucian scholars have even attempted to offer a Confucian reading of China’s state leadership, either for the purpose of nudging the state to adopt more Confucian ideals or just providing a decoration to make the state leadership more palatable to a Confucian-leaning population in China.⁵ Others are cautious. Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍, a prominent Confucian scholar, has reservations about the state sponsorship of Confucianism. In his view, the change of attitudes from demonizing Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to accepting Confucianism as a reasonable cultural and moral force in Chinese history and in today’s society is a good sign of progress. However, he worries about how Confucianism can preserve its independence in today’s society.⁶ In his view, losing its independence, Confucianism will no longer be what it is and will become a mere tool for the state to consolidate its power of control. For similar reasons, Yu Yingshih has declared that today’s state sponsorship of Confucianism is “the kiss of death.”⁷ The shared

³ Quoted in “Don’t Make Confucianism an Ideology” 不要把儒家意識形態化, accessed 31 July 2019, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sd/2011-01-20/145121847192.shtml>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For instance, see <http://www.chinashixue.com.cn/>.

⁶ 張祥龍: 儒家真正的大復興在未來, accessed on 28 May 2019, <http://www.pku.org.cn/people/rwft/85370.htm>.

⁷ <https://chinachange.org/2015/07/01/the-chinese-communists-are-not-confucianists/>.

message of these three scholars is that Confucianism must avoid being used by political power even if that means not collaborating with state power.

Such a view is not un-Confucian. Classic Confucian thinkers never said that one should *unconditionally* serve the state. Confucius famously said that, if the Dao 道 failed to prevail, he would take a raft to sail on the ocean (*Analects* 5.7). This comment can be read as suggesting that morality outweighs any political or social position he may have. If the ruler was no good and society was corrupt, not only Confucius would not serve the state, he would not even live in the country. Mencius 2B5 records a story about serving the state by giving advice to rulers. Mencius encouraged Chi Wa 蚺 蠅 to serve as the Marshal of the Guards in the state of Qi 齊 so Chi could advise the ruler. Then the ruler did not take Chi's advice. Chi quit his official post and left Qi. People then wondered why Mencius did not leave Qi. Mencius responded,

One who holds an office will resign it if he is unable to discharge his duties, and one whose responsibility is to give advice will resign if his advice is not followed. I hold no office, neither have I any responsibility for giving advice. Why should I not have plenty of scope when it comes to the question of staying or leaving? (Lau 1970, 89, modified)

In Mencius's view, Confucian scholars can work with the state when their advice is followed. They should not cling to government posts when their advice is ignored. Mencius was free to stay or leave as he was not part of the state apparatus. We should understand this view in the context of moral consideration. A ruler's action can be morally right or wrong. The responsibility of Confucian scholars is to advise the ruler to do morally right things. When the ruler refuses and does the opposite, it is a matter of moral principle not to remain with the ruler by continuing to serve him. Such a view was echoed in the "Zi Dao" chapter of the *Xunzi* that, when the ruler does not follow the Dao, one should follow the Dao rather than follow the ruler. In Xunzi's view, serving the Dao and serving the ruler may converge. Between the two, the primary imperative is to serve the Dao. When the two

diverge, one must choose the Dao rather than the ruler. Following these ideas of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, we can derive the principle that, if working with the state necessitates compromising moral principles, Confucians should not collaborate with state power. My earlier discussion of the conflict between the ultimate goal of state power and Confucian moral ideals, along with the “dirty hands” problem, has established that collaborating with state power inevitably compromises moral principles. Therefore, our conclusion is that Confucianism must not collaborate with state power.

The Confucian idea of “kingliness” or *wangdao* 王道 (the kingly way) has never meant to be merely about serving in government. *Analects* 2.21 records,

Someone said of Confucius, “Why is the master not engaged in government?” The Master said, “The *Book of Documents* says: ‘Filial, simply in being filial, and befriending your brothers, the influence will extend to government.’ This is also engaging in governing. Why must there be any extra ‘engagement in government’?” (Ni 2017, 110)

“Engagement in government” is a translation of *weizheng* 爲政. Confucius understood “*zheng*” in terms of its homonym “正,” getting things right *zhengzhe*, *zhengye*. 政者, 正也. *Analects* 12.17. Namely, government is about getting things right in society. Evidently, for Confucius, one can engage in such affairs without actually holding a post in government. Serving in government in ancient times was a way to realize the Confucian ideal of the good society, realize the kingly way. It was a means to an end, the end being the Confucian vision of the good society.

We should note that ancient Confucian thinkers operated within a social system in which their philosophy could not exert direct influence on society at large without state sponsorship. Serving in government was seen as the most effective way, to some even the only effective way, for Confucians to achieve their social ideals through political means. Caught in the Confucian dilemma of politics, they had either to seek state sponsorship at the risk of compromising their moral principles or to become marginalized in society. Some may

think Confucianism should give up on the ideal of “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” and that it should focus solely on ethics and retreat from politics. This amounts to embracing the first horn of the dilemma. I think such a move would be a grave mistake. Such a separation of “inner sageliness” from “outer kingliness” would fatally undercut Confucianism.

If Confucianism does not seek alliance with the state, nor does it accept marginalization in society, what other option does it have? This is the most important political question for Confucian thinkers today. In answering this question, we must realize that times have changed. We are now in a democratic era. Democracy opens a door for Confucianism to get out of the dilemma without having to embrace either horn. We need to reconsider the practical implications of the ideal of “outer kingliness” in our age. In a democratic era, politics is not merely about working in government; it can be effectively pursued from outside of government. In the contemporary times, Confucianism can shape society through democratic participation. In a society that is less than democratic, Confucians should first advocate democracy to create conditions for democratic participation. Confucianism can affect government policy without having to solicit favor from government. This makes it possible for Confucianism to play an effective role in shaping social policies as an independent force.

In conclusion, Confucianism should finally wake up from its long-held dream of promoting its philosophy at the mercy of rulers. Instead, Confucians should advocate democracy as a means to gain direct influence on shaping and determining the course of society, to realize their ideal of “outer kingliness.” In other words, in a democratic era, the Confucian ideal of “outer kingliness” must be carried out through democratic participation. Confucians should support the state when it does things right in congruence with Confucianism while maintaining its own independence from the state; it must reserve the right to challenge and criticize politicians when they diverge from Confucian ideals. Only by so doing can Confucianism promote its philosophy while at the same time maintaining its dignity and true spirit without distortion. It is time to declare the independence of Confucianism from the state.

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