

Boston Confucianism “Self-Cultivation” Concept as Socio-Cultural and Worldview Competency Tool in Liberal Arts’ Education

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Abstract: In the XIXth century China has been faced massive infiltration of Western social and political thoughts and as a result Confucianism was transformed once again via assimilation of these Western trends’ elements; this was the period where Modern Confucianism began to form. However, this process was insufficient and required a solution for a task to find an optimal model to create the effective and fruitful dialogue between Chinese and Western civilizations, where the main obstacle is the problem to combine both spiritual heritage of Tianxia and newest philosophical methods and ideas of the West. One of the most remarkable attempts of such adaptation to modern world realities was a creation of “Modern Confucianism” movement. It has never been monolithic and served as a classified term, which united several separate trends and schools. This research touches upon one of the essential aspects in Boston school of Modern Confucianism concepts – “Self-Cultivation”, and its possible application in higher education sphere (particularly, in the model of “liberal arts’ education”) as a tool of socio-cultural and worldview competencies.

1. Introduction

Confucian thought has been developed for several centuries. It passed through transformation processes and changes under the different circumstances: political, economic and cultural factors in different eras. It has also “absorbed” elements from other philosophical traditions, including those that came from other countries. One of the main problematics, developed by Boston Confucians, on one hand, is the question to combine both philosophical and spiritual traditions and renovate it on Western thought achievements’ basis; on the other hand, they also face the question to apply such combination results in practice, particularly, in higher education sphere. As a result – the problems of the terms’ interpretation in XXth century took first place in Boston thinkers’ works, especially in context of actual problems in youngsters’ education in the USA. In today’s world, especially in humanity science, we have already stepped away from strict borders in academic disciplines and promote mutual “enrichment” through interdisciplinary dialogue. Moreover, philosophy of postmodernism, dominated at the end of 20th and in the beginning of the 21st centuries, allowed to use the opportunity to construct various paradigms via different combinations of philosophical schools and trends, that previously were historically and culturally isolated from one another. Finally, speaking on local tendencies, the very idea of Christianity, in terms of religious and cultural aspects, is thought to be the “combination” or “fusion” between Judaistic and Hellenistic ideas that has become traditional in the American culture [1].

2. Liberal Arts’ Education and Self-Cultivation Concept

“Self-Cultivation” is one of the key terms in Boston School Confucians and marks the process of self-improvement. It is thought to be the foundation to broaden, deepen, develop various number of social relations. Social and cultural aspects play one of the main roles in Boston Confucians’ argumentation, especially in context of its application to the “excessively individualistic” Western mind, especially in youth education in USA [2]. It leads to create the new personality understanding:

“Self-Cultivation” is thought to be understood in two main ways: on one hand, the personality exists, and fully socializes beyond the bounds of own “ego” and does so to be open to society and, perhaps, helps to build up social “spirituality” in society out of cultural, religious or linguistic contexts, despite the specific, or, sometimes, stereotypical meaning of “ego” itself [3]. On the other hand, “Bostonians” speak about person “nurture” in his specific realization – gender or ethnical identification, age, religious views, education level or what language he or she is used to speak [4]. The term of “Self-Cultivation” which is often mentioned in works of Tu Wei-ming and R. C. Neville comes from Confucian tradition as the process, targeting on benefit or nurturing of own “self” and is understood as basic element to construct the various social relations. It is explained to be the process when person is both in the world “here-and-now” and at the same time can be beyond the limits of own “self” to conceive the world in its wholeness. That is why strict inner center is required for not to lose the personal identity. Human is a risky creature due to total inadaptability and absence of “inner-established harmony” that is presented as an example among animals. That is why people often do not have strict inner center. However, Tu Wei-ming makes his accent on an ontological aspect, not a physiological one in his concepts.

Speaking of such terms as “individuality”, “autonomy of personality” and “human dignity”, I should add that concept of “Self-Cultivation” is required long-term and sustainable attention to your own personality cultivation and can help us to look at common things the other way. However, such “egocentric” point of view, though it can be seen negatively, is the necessary orienteer in Confucians’ ethic and the image of “junzi” is the suitable example here [5]. Despite that process of personality moral growth requires serious long-term interaction with other personalities and in society at all for his or her own purposes, it doesn’t mean that such person is an egoist.

The “Self-Cultivation” concept is therefore one of the newest interpretation of Confucians’ understanding of personality to its own improvement through transformation already presenting characteristics in something more “universal” than just part of single individuum description. As a result, we are faced that, firstly, self-improvement inseparably bond while interact with others in our daily life, and secondly, that nutrition process of own “self” is not equal to the time, when you act selfishly as it happens to be orientated due to the society welfare.

As we could see, such attitude is well-correlated to the model of liberal arts’ education, which was proposed by J. H. Newman, Fr. D. Morris and U. Gr. Edy in 19th. According to this concept, the main problem of higher education dwells not on receiving the sum of accumulated knowledge by following fixed states’ program but touches the worldview and ethical issues in youngsters’ upbringing. This idea has its roots in concept of “seven liberal arts” from Middle Ages’ universities and is understood as the philosophy of education, which “is more concerned with the development of the individual than the preparation of the student for a specific vocation” [6]. Such tendency is improved day by day as part of globalization process. Particularly, it was realized in Russia as separate faculty of “liberal arts and sciences” in St. Petersburg University (SPBU); this faculty was established on purpose to form “critical mind” and worldview among students. As a result, it is supposed to increase the level of personality individualization with formed type of mindset and chosen realization path. Tu Weiming notes that “to cultivate the human way, which is real purpose of education... combination of natural growth and careful cultivation is the best method to establish and enlarge the human way.”[7]. Therefore, the concept of Boston school of Modern Confucianism suits liberal arts education system by referring to the position “here-and-now” and approving social features with followed acceptance of own cultural, gender, religious and other identities to the solo human being as well as to other people.

3. Conclusion

The current Analects translations to the wide range of foreign languages and the following popularization of Confucianism all over the globe made its ethics attractive to western scientists, especially in terms of cultural and moral values’ crisis in the West. The globalization process, originated in the Anglo-American traditions, at the same time gives the search for new “universals” a push, thus ethics becomes their “working field” in 21st century. That is why the Confucian moral

philosophical tradition becomes attractive to the subsequent interpretation in terms of the American analytical tradition. In traditional interpretation of Confucianism, personality is not something inherently to human being – it is good but has to be cultivated throughout life of specific individual. Thus, the concept of “Self-cultivation” is a striking example of an attempt to adapt this attitude to the Western soil, combining several aspects of the Chinese philosophical tradition, for example: the rectification of names or concept of ritual. The concept that Tu Weiming and R. K. Neville are developing, suggests a different look to the individual upbringing and education. The notion is dualistic: on the one hand, it requires to abstract from the original worldviews of a specific human being, in order to possibly be unbiased to the already accepted “rules of the game” and to build social “spirituality” out of the cultural context, religious or linguistic identity; on the other hand, there is a tendency to take into account all of the above aspects of personality in education; That is made not in order to expose unique personality traits (racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, gender, etc.), but to reveal them in its wholeness and, again, to enrich the “spirit” of society through the personal beginning in a human being. If we add “a pinch” of Confucianism into the educational sphere, that could possibly lead to the development of a person who can listen, broaden his/her horizons, be responsible for own words and actions and engage the skills in self-reflection.

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