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Confucian Culture vs. Dynastic Power in Chinese History

PREFACE

THE PERSONAL views in this essay concerning the relationship between culture and power in traditional China are expressed in honor of my friend Hoyt Cleveland Tillman's retirement at the end of academic year 2018–19, after forty-three years of distinguished service to Arizona State University. The essay given here served as the keynote to the March 29–30, 2019, conference at Arizona State University to discuss "Culture and Power in China's History," an international conference supported, in part, by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Exchange. It sets forth an overview of the interactive dynamism of Confucian culture and state power, not only as it developed and changed in historical context but also with an analogy to a pair of Siamese twins who require one another for life, yet need to counterbalance one another.

KEYWORDS:
Mandate of Heaven, Han Wudi, shared governance, Zhu Xi, Ming Taizu, Wang Yangming

To begin with, I wish to point out, in the case of China, culture and power may very well be viewed as a pair of Siamese twins, each one requiring the other in order to live. Let me briefly explain what I mean. According to tradition, in the age of the so-called Three Dynasties (*sandai* 三代) of antiquity (the Xia 夏, Shang 商 and Zhou 周, which were the earliest dynasties in Chinese history), the dynastic power to rule had already been justified in terms of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命). Evidence suggests that by the time of the early Zhou (around the mid-eleventh century BC), if not earlier, the Mandate of Heaven was generally understood in the following way: when Heaven (*tian* 天) discovered the founder of a dynasty endowed with qualities called "*de*"

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德 (usually translated as "virtue") that predisposed him to such "virtues" as moderation, the inclination to heed good advice, piety in sacrifices to spirits, et cetera, Heaven would give him the mandate to govern and to care for the people. As long as the same "*de*" could be sustained from generation to generation, Heaven would not take away the dynasty's mandate to rule. Clearly, the idea of *tianming* already implies that from the very beginning of Chinese history, dynastic power had been viewed as owing its legitimacy to the support of some specific cultural qualities called *de*. It is interesting to note how the notion of *tianming* was later transformed into the Confucian system of culture, such as Confucius' "rule of virtue" and Mencius' "benevolent government."

On the other hand, Confucian learning (*ruxue* 儒學) as a kind of "practical wisdom" (to borrow the term of Aristotle) is concerned not only with knowledge and ideas but also with action, in other words, the positive disposition of humans that are sought and found through practical wisdom must be put into practice. This is perhaps why Confucius and Mencius went from state to state trying to persuade the feudal princes to transform the *Dao* 道 into reality. Thus we see that culture also needed power to authenticate its values.

With this historical background in mind, I shall very briefly outline the relations between dynastic power and Confucian culture under four major dynasties – Han, Tang, Song, and Ming.

It is a generally accepted view that China became thoroughly Confucianized under the Han dynasty. Thanks to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179–104 BC), Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200–127 BC), and other Confucian scholars, emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 140–87 BC) accepted their proposal to establish Confucianism as a state ideology – an ideology that endured until the end of the imperial age in 1911. As a result, only the Confucian classics were taught for the training of government officials in the Imperial Academy (*taixue* 太學) and in local schools. Moreover, important state policies and institutional arrangements adopted by the imperial court also became based on Confucian principles verifiable in one classical text or another. On the surface, dynastic power and Confucian culture seem to have, indeed, worked together harmoniously as well as fruitfully under the Han.

However, once we explore the basic attitude of the Han emperors toward Confucians and their sacred classics, the above picture of power versus culture would have to be vastly modified. For illustration, let me give three interesting examples. First, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 206–195 BC), the Han founding emperor who came from an uneducated com-

moner's background and had no respect for Confucian scholars; he was famous for washing his feet while receiving a group of them for the first time during his reign. When his trusted adviser Lu Jia 陸賈 (240–170 BC) tried to call his attention to the *Odes* 詩經 (also called the *Classic of Poetry*) and the *Documents* 書經 (or, *Classic of History*), two of the then Five Classics, the emperor rebuked him with the following comment: "Whatever I possess I gained on horseback; why should I bother with the *Odes* and *Documents*?"

Second, emperor Xuan 宣帝 (r. 73–49 BC) is described in the *History of the Han*, or *Han shu* 漢書 (compiled in the late-first century AD), as oriented to Legalism: "He mainly employed Legalist officials with their multitude of statutes, and he restricted his subjects (i.e., officials as well as the people) according to their 'activities and names' 刑名 (a general designation for Legalist governing principles)." Later, when the heir-apparent suggested to him that it might be good to appoint some Confucians to office, he was very upset and responded angrily: "We, the Han dynasty, have our own institutions and laws, combining various elements from hegemonic lords and sage-kings of the past. How could we rely solely upon the rule of virtue or upon Zhou-dynasty governmental ways?" In this case, it is truly remarkable that a Han emperor, only a decade away from emperor Wu's reign, openly announced that his dynasty was not exclusively Confucian.Our last example comes from emperor Wu himself. As mentioned above, he established Confucianism as state ideology under the influence of such Confucian scholars as Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong. The latter was the more important because the whole project was actually carried out through his efforts as chief minister (*zaixiang* 宰相), the very first Confucian scholar to have been appointed to this most important office in the empire. Let us find out why he became so trusted by emperor Wu.

He began his career as a minor local official and did not commence the study of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and other related classical texts until age forty. As a high-ranking official under emperor Wu, according to his *Han shu* biography, "he became skilled in writing, the laws, and bureaucratic affairs, and above all, he further adorned it all with a semblance of Confucian ways." Thus, his performance greatly delighted emperor Wu. Other accounts (in both *Shiji* 史記 and *Han shu*) even further specify that what emperor Wu particularly liked about him was his ingenuity in adorning laws and bureaucratic affairs with Confucian learning. I wish to call the reader's attention to the "adornment" business; the original expression was "adorned by means of Ru, or Confucian, teaching 緣飾以儒術." This "adornment" usually

took the form of buttressing a Legalistic decision or judgment in important cases with citations from a Confucian text, such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The implication was quite obvious: a Confucian sage in the past would have approved the specific Han imperial decision, or judgment. Moreover, emperor Wu's trust of Dong Zhongshu was also related to "adornment." *Han shu* has the following overview: Emperor Wu considered Dong Zhongshu, Gongsun Hong, and Ni Kuan 倪寬 (d. 103 BC) to be the three most important officials in the whole empire because all of them were Confucians well-versed in worldly affairs, fully acquainted with laws and, at the same time, effectively accomplished in adorning governmental matters with classical learning.

With the evidence shown above, it seems beyond reasonable doubt to suggest that emperor Wu's choice of Confucianism as state ideology was not made on account of its intrinsic value as a belief system, but because of the decorative functions of language in its classical texts.

Next, we turn to the Tang dynasty. In the past, people usually spoke of a "Confucian revival" during the Sui-Tang reunification. Modern scholarship has conclusively shown that this is an overstatement. During the age of disunity, roughly from the third to the end of the sixth century, neo-Daoist discourse and Buddhist speculation converged to form the mainstream of thought. By contrast, Confucian classical exegesis remained in a stereotyped and lifeless state. This situation continued well into the Tang period. The mid-seventh century AD compilation of Confucian canonical texts with detailed subcommentaries, titled *Wujing zhengyi* 五經正義, was, of course, a great contribution to classical scholarship. However, it was only one among several large-scale historical and literary projects produced simply for educational purposes in the early Tang: it did not lead to a new stage of Confucian development. As a matter of fact, it was two centuries after the Sui-Tang unification that Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824 AD) began to impact the world of literati writers and thinkers, thus bringing on a Confucian breakthrough; however, that was too late to have any bearing on Tang dynastic power.

Politically, the Tang government treated the so-called Three Teachings – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – equally by allowing each to send a "representative" to the imperial court. During the early Tang, representatives of the Three Teachings often participated in debates at court presided over by the emperor. However, evidence clearly shows that, of the three, Confucianism appears to have been the least favored as far as the imperial house was concerned. My reasons may be briefly presented as follows.

First – Daoism: From the very beginning, Tang emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) claimed that his royal family (Li 李) descended from Laozi 老子 (whose personal name was Li Er 李耳). Later, in the 740s, emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) set up schools for Daoist studies to prepare candidates for a special examination on Daoist canonical scriptures. Earlier, in 726, he had ordered every household in the empire to keep a copy of the *Daodejing* 道德經 and two decades later, in 747, he formally declared it the most important of all canonical books in the world. This perhaps explains why he personally wrote a commentary on it with the title, *Daode zhenjing shu* 道德真經疏 (now included in the compiled Daoist canon titled *Dao zang* 道藏, in volume 356). Furthermore, in 732 every prefecture was ordered to set up a temple in honor of Laozi. In contrast, Confucius and the major work attributed directly to him and his school, the *Analects*, was throughout the Tang never comparably honored.

Second – Buddhism: An enhanced Tang imperial patronage of Buddhism began with the reign of empress Wu 武后 (r. ca. 684–705). It happened at this time that a minor sutra called the *Mahamegha* (*Great Cloud*) sutra, was available in Chinese translation as *Dayun jing* 大雲經. This work contained a prophecy about the immanent reincarnation of Maitreya as a female deity and supreme ruler of the whole world. When empress Wu's attention was called to it, she was glad to spread the message everywhere. Consequently, she ordered Great Cloud Temples established in every prefecture of the empire. Imperial patronage of Buddhism continued on in time, but for different reasons. For example, from 762 to 820, three Tang emperors (Daizong 岱宗, Dezong 德宗, and Xianzong 憲宗) successively promoted Buddhism in the emperor's court. Some emperors, such as Xianzong in 819 and Yizong 懿宗 in 873, went so far as to hold a ceremony, with dazzling splendor, that venerated the Buddha's bone. The 819 ceremony was especially famous in Tang history due to Han Yu's furious denunciation of it.

The Tang dynasty's claim to political Confucianization was traditionally based on the assumption that its governmental structure as a whole embodied the system of the Zhou dynasty that was preserved in the canonical Confucian work titled the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮). The historical background runs as follows: In 722 emperor Xuanzong ordered court officials to compile a comprehensive guidebook on current Tang legal and administrative codes, to be named *Six Regulations of the Tang* (*Tang liu dian* 唐六典). But the emperor further specified that their product must be organized according to the systems of codification written in *Zhouli*, which divided administrative functions into six

major categories. The new code was finished in 738 and promulgated to the empire the next year. As modern scholarship has conclusively shown, actual Tang bureaucratic practices were so different from the *Zhouli* system that the forced analogy between the two was a senseless failure. The conclusion is unavoidable: emperor Xuanzong was merely trying to use the *Zhouli* classic for adornment, very much in the spirit of some of his Han counterparts, as discussed above.

Finally, I wish to point out that the decline of Confucian classical scholarship in the Tang intellectual world is also reflected in their civil examination system. At the beginning, the *mingjing* 明經 and the *jinshi* 進士 examinations were, at least theoretically, of equal importance, the former's subject-matter being classical scholarship and the latter's political affairs. However, from the last quarter of the seventh century on, the former demanded detailed textual knowledge while the latter emphasized creative prose and verse. Unfortunately, the *mingjing* became an examination focused on memorization of certain key passages in canonical texts. It resulted in its being increasingly despised among the intellectual and political elite.

Third – the Song dynasty: The most successful case of cooperation between dynastic power and Confucian culture occurred in the Song period. The founding emperor, Taizu 太祖 (r. 960–976), uncomfortable with the military threats hanging over his new dynasty – threats that began in the late Tang and continued through the entire Five Dynasties period, decided to entrust the administration of the empire, central as well as local, to China's most powerful administrators and cultural leaders, called the *shi* 士, that is, scholar-officials (士大夫 *shidafu*), or, the literati – men chosen for office through the civil examinations. *Shi* scholars from the very start of this policy showed great enthusiasm for trying to establish a reasonable political and social order according to the Confucian vision. For instance, Zhao Pu 趙普 (922–992), the dynasty's first chief minister, was widely reported as having an agenda that called for imperial rule to be based on Confucius' *Analects*. This interpretation of Zhao's career cannot be historically verified, but at least it may be viewed as a reflection of Song Confucians' expectations of a chief minister's role. Later, great Confucian scholars, like Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) and Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), once in power, did exactly what people earlier were expecting from Zhao Pu. In the case of Wang, the extraordinary mutual support between him and emperor Shenzong 神宗 (r. 1067–1085) was unprecedented. Shenzong not only put his full authority into the implementation of Wang's

reform program but often yielded to him when serious differences of opinion occurred.

It is particularly worth noting that out of this reform movement, a new idea of political partnership between the emperor, on the one hand, and *shi* officials under the leadership of a chief minister, on the other hand, emerged. Emperor Shenzong once told his court officials that the reform was a policy of utmost importance and therefore must be decided jointly through deliberations between him and the *shi* officials as partners in the imperial court. At the same time, a ranking official named Wen Yanbo 文彥博 (1006–1097) also emphasized the following point to Shenzong, "Making a good order for the world is a responsibility shared between Your Majesty and *shi* officials." Clearly, this is the same idea of partnership expressed in a different way. Later, Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) characterized this political partnership as "ruling the empire together" (*tong zhi tianxia* 同治天下), which has been generally accepted by historians today.

This partnership continued well into the Southern Song period. It is clearly shown in the cooperation between emperor Xiaozong 孝宗 (r. 1162–1189) and a group of Confucians under the leadership of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), during the last three years of the reign (that is, 1187–1189). In 1187, Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1130–1162), the founding emperor of the Southern Song passed away. Though long retired, he had continued to interfere with government affairs from time to time. Now, after twenty-five years, the reigning emperor Xiaozong became free to rule for the first time and therefore was determined to start a wide-ranging reform project of his own. Zhu Xi and many Confucians in the government were the most sympathetic to the emperor's reform project, so he naturally turned to them for support. They worked closely together as partners for shared goals, and Zhu Xi even characterized their cooperation as, "bringing the Dao to the world with the support of the throne 得君行道." It should occasion no surprise that later a student of Zhu Xi named Cao Yanyue 曹彥約 (1157–1228) referred to *shi* officials in a memorial to the emperor as "corulers of the empire 天下之共治者." (For details, see my Chinese-language book on Zhu Xi's historical world and Song political culture: *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie* 朱熹的歷史世界 [Taipei: Yunchen, 2003; Beijing: Sanlian, 2004].)

Fourth – the Ming: The worst case is the Ming dynasty. The Ming imperial system has long been defined as despotic by historians worldwide. In what follows, I shall briefly note how Confucian culture related itself to this despotism.

The founding emperor, Ming Taizu 太祖 (r. 1368–1398), emerged from a peasant family with little or no education during his childhood. He rose to power from the rank and file of a millenarian rebel group known to be followers of *Mingjiao* 明教, a popular religious sect consisting of mixed beliefs taken from Buddhism, Manichaeism, et cetera, whose followers were recruited mainly from among the uneducated masses. He did not have much contact with Confucian scholars until two or three years before founding his dynasty in 1368. By then he was very much aware that he needed *shi* scholars not only for government services but also to gain Confucian legitimation of the dynasty. However, he did not trust *shi* officials and found remonstrative Confucians in the imperial court particularly intolerable. His deep suspicion of the *shi*, as potential or actual usurpers of his imperial power, culminated in the bloody purges of 1380 in which the chief minister Hu Weiyong 胡惟庸 (1301–1380) and thousands of his alleged followers were charged with treason and executed. At the same time, he even took the bold historical move of abolishing the office of chief minister, the institution, as discussed earlier, that had begun with the unification of China in 221 BC, if not before. As a result, the political partnership between the throne and *shi* officialdom, led by a *zaixiang* under the Song dynasty, was no longer practicable.

The case has now been well established that Ming Taizu was a whole-hearted advocate for Legalism. As clearly shown in his famous "Great Announcements" ("Dagao" 大誥), he held true to the Legalist principle that holds to "the superiority of the sovereign vis-à-vis the servility of officialdom 君尊臣卑." He was also a great admirer of Han Fei 韓非 (280–233 BC), the principal Legalist thinker in antiquity. In contrast, he showed no respect for Confucianism. In this respect, his attitude toward the classic *Mencius* 孟子 is particularly revealing. He found many passages in it extremely objectionable, such as "People are most important; the state comes next, and the monarch the least." In 1397, he ordered all such passages excised from the original version.

Taizu's espousal of the Cheng-Zhu Confucian orthodoxy was more apparent than real. One example suffices for the purpose of illustration. When Li Shilu 李仕魯 (d. 1383), a leading Zhu Xi scholar of the day, was recommended to the imperial court, Taizu appeared extremely excited and said to him, "I have been looking for you for a long time." However, a few years later, true to his Cheng-Zhu tradition, Li Shilu repeatedly memorialized the throne against excessive imperial patronage of Buddhism, but to no avail. Frustrated and angry, he abruptly, in protest, submitted his resignation during an audience with the em-

peror. In a great rage, Taizu immediately ordered guards to have him beaten to death on the steps of the palace hall. Under despotism like this, it is no wonder that early-Ming Confucians like Wu Yubi 吳與弼 (1391–1469) and his leading disciples, all refused to serve in the imperial court and even abandoned examination studies altogether.

The most important impact of Ming despotism on Confucian culture was the stepping back from the Song Confucian project to "bring the Dao to the world with the support of the throne." By the Ming period, it became crystal clear that this was a total illusion. Nevertheless, "bringing the Dao to the world" as a basic Confucian commitment must always be kept alive. Otherwise, there would be no Confucianism to talk about. The question then would become where to find support for this commitment? Here, we see the utmost importance of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) and his new theory of "innate knowledge of the good" (*liangzhi* 良知). According to Wang, every individual person is born with *liangzhi* which can be awakened to perceive the Dao. Therefore, instead of yielding to the throne above in the imperial court, Wang Yangming proposed to look downward to the common people (including scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants – the so-called four categories of people 四民) for support. As a result, he spread *liangzhi* ideas in society through public lectures and encouraged his disciples to do the same. Later, with the assistance of Wang Gen's 王艮 (1483–1541) Taizhou School 泰州學派, Wang Yangming's revised Confucian project was transformed into a powerful popular movement that continued well into the early-seventeenth century. This revised Confucian project is too complicated to be dealt with here. For details, see my English-language essay, "Reorientation of Confucian Social Thought in the Age of Wang Yangming," now included in my *Chinese History and Culture* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2016), vol. 1, pp. 273–320.

In conclusion, the interaction between culture and power throughout China's history has always been in flux since both are dynamic and changing. Just like Siamese twins, culture and power require one another to develop, but also struggle with, and impose restrictions on, each other. Either one might for a time appear clearly dominant and easily manipulating the other, but realities are often more complex. What is "mainstream" in Chinese culture over time has, of course, changed significantly and has shifted among Legalism, Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and various religious beliefs grounded deeply in Chinese society. In this short essay, we have also shown some of the radically variant approaches used by imperial dynasties in dealing with culture. For instance, Han and Tang utilized Confucian culture and

classics primarily as mere "adornment" to aggrandize their *Realpolitik*, or "Legalist" policies. Only during the Song were there occasionally serious attempts to promote and implement a significant measure of "shared governance," that is, a partnership between the emperor and his scholar-officials. Yet, the imperfect experiment during the Song was soon eclipsed by Yuan military forces and then overwhelmed by the absolutist executive power of Ming despotism. Yet, despite the oppressive weight of such despotism, Confucian scholars, like Wang Yangming, persisted by turning more attention to the masses and developing a new Confucian agenda and ethic for society. One might say that without the tension between Confucian culture and state power as "counterpoised collaborators," China's polity and society would not have developed as well as it did.