

Core Spirit and Function in Confucianism from the Perspective of Soft Power of Chinese Culture

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Abstract

The core spirit of Confucianism can be summarized as “virtue as the foundation, group as the importance and harmony as the quintessence” from the perspective of enhancing soft power of Chinese culture. The three elements are neither parallel nor primary-secondary but trine and synthesis of them represents the essence of the Confucian culture which not only plays the role in condensation, but also displays Chinese cultural unique characteristics, deep roots and universal value. These spiritual resources should be paid full attention in the process of constructing soft power of Chinese culture today.

Key words: Confucianism; Virtue; Group; Harmony; Soft power of culture

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INTRODUCTION

“Soft Power” was proposed by Joseph Nye Jr. in 1989. According to his view, it comes from three kinds of resources which are cultural values, political values and foreign policy respectively. There are different translations about the word “Soft Power” in China. Some of them

are primarily used in cultural level, and some of them are mainly used in the political and diplomatic level. However, “soft power of culture”, as a proper noun, is created by Chinese scholars in a certain sense. Researchers in China proposed cultural power in the mid 1990 of the 20th century, and “soft power of culture” is “the extension or the development of the concept of cultural power and soft power” (JIA, 2008). In 2007, the “cultural soft power” was written in the 17th major report for the first time, and this year is also known as a mark year of constructing soft power (YU, 2007). Since then, “soft power of culture” became the hot spot in academia. Its research paths can be broadly divided into four types: method of exploring the origin of theory, method of transforming traditional culture, method of comparing and referring horizontally and method of sublimating popular culture (YANG, 2011). Although the relation between Chinese traditional culture and the construction of “soft power of Chinese culture” has drawn widespread attention, different views exist in “whether traditional culture can be considered as the main resource of soft power of culture or not”. This paper concentrates on Confucianism, the trunk of Chinese traditional culture, refines the core Confucian cultural spirit from the perspective of enhancing soft power of Chinese culture, and discusses its role in new era with the consideration of the diffusion status of Confucianism in the domestic and overseas.

1. CONSTITUTION OF CONFUCIAN CORE SPIRIT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOFT POWER OF CULTURE

Confucianism has changed and been divided into many sects since it was created by Confucius 2000 years ago, which means the connotation of Confucian cultural spirit is very rich. In order to exact the core cultural spirit of Confucianism from the perspective of enhancing soft

power of Chinese cultural, this paper pays attention to three criterions. Firstly, “constitution of core cultural spirit” should represent the essence of Confucian culture; Secondly, “constitution of core cultural spirit” should be different from foreign culture, that is to say, it should be with Chinese characteristics; Finally, “constitution of core cultural spirit”, as the promotion of soft power of Chinese cultural, should include world value and modern meaning’s content which plays a part in uniting people’s mind, establishing a national presence and creating cultural influence. According to these criterions, this paper summarizes “constitution of core cultural spirit” as virtue as the foundation, group as the importance and harmony as the quintessence. It is worth noting that the three elements are neither parallel nor primary-secondary but trine. The main content of virtue contains benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faithfulness, respectful, tolerance, kindness, etc., and many of them involve interpersonal communication and reflect the value orientation of “group as the importance”. Similarly, the requirements of “group as the importance” consist of filial piety, fraternal love, loyalty, forgiveness, honor, etc., and all of them are part of the moral cultivation. If we can implement the content and requirements properly and make them achieve the best situation with the best solutions, then we can describe it with harmony. In addition, the reason why tri-relation can be formed is that “perfecting ourselves” and “helping others” in Confucianism are integral. On the one hand, Confucianism emphasizes on utilizing benevolence, righteousness, propriety to cultivate characters and form ideal personality such as gentlemen or saints. On the other hand, it diligently pursues to apply these moral principles on others to coordinate relationships and harmonize social order, which is considered as a transition from paying attention to one’s own moral uplift to relieving the whole society and aiming to create an ideal society.

1.1 Virtue as the Foundation

Virtue is considered as the foundation of Confucianism. Firstly, Confucianism utilizes virtue to regulate the essence of people and proposes that it is moral cultivation what makes people be nobler than beasts. For example, Confucius said, “benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity” (ZHU, 1998). Mencius said, “That whereby man differs from the lower animals is small. The mass of people cast it away, while superior men preserve it” (YANG, 2000, p. 191). Hsun Tzu said, “fire and water possess a spirit but no life, grass and trees possess a life but no awareness, birds and animals possess awareness but no sense of morality, only humans possess spirit, life, awareness, as well as the sense of morality, hence the noblest beings in the world” (ZHANG, 2006). Secondly, Confucianism utilizes virtue to judge people and distinguishes superior men from villain by the fulfillment of virtue and morality. Confucius said, “Though a man

has abilities as admirable as those of the duke of Zhou, if he is proud and niggardly, those other things are really not worth being looked at”. “Setting up one’s virtue” is put in the first place in three achievements planned by Confucianism for people’s life, which corresponds with “setting up one’s virtue”, “setting up one’s meritorious” and “expounding one’s ideas in writing”. Thirdly, Confucianism considers virtue as the foundation of achieving other business. That is to say, people should “cultivate themselves in reverential carefulness”, then “cultivate themselves so as to give rest to others” and “cultivate themselves so as to give rest to all the people”. “Self-cultivation” is followed by “family harmony, state governing and world peace”, and “inner sageliness” is followed by “outer kingliness”. Finally, Confucianism contends that people should value righteousness more than benefit, restrict benefit by righteousness, think of righteousness when they are in the view of benefit, think of righteousness when they are in the view of gain, and even die for justice.

The emphasis on virtue in Confucianism fosters Chinese moral culture, distinguishes it from the western intellectual culture, and has a profound impact in our history. For example, Chinese people intend that we should win people by virtue in politics and expect benevolent government. In order to consolidate their exalted position, the ancient emperors usually portrayed themselves with virtue. Although they might not be virtuous monarchs, it represents their political value orientation. Moreover, virtue is considered as the standard to judge if a monarch is successful or not. On top of these, Chinese oppose aggressive war and insist on winning people by courtesy, treating people by virtue, and perfecting people by education. For example, Ming emperor Yuanzhang Zhu said, “Other countries are all far from China, both their people and land are meaningless for Chinese. If they overstate their own strength and invade China, we will use military methods to sanction them; if they are not detrimental to China, there will be need to consider them as our enemies. I am afraid our generations rely on our richness and power and covet achievements, so they wage war and cause injury and death. It is forbidden”. Similarly, when ZHENG He’s voyages down to the western seas, he said, “We aims to propagate moral education in overseas, diffuse knowledge on courtesy and righteousness, and make other countries respect us”. During that time, ZHENG He presented Chinese property generously, received praise widely, and used force hardly, which revealed a great country’s spirit. The harmonious diplomacy does not exist in every dynasty, but it still is the main stream of our current foreign policy.

1.2 Group as the Importance

Group is considered as the basic value orientation of Confucianism. Firstly, Confucianism intends that people cannot be separated from group. A man is not a lonely

individual, but he plays a social role and undertakes some social responsibilities. Secondly, Confucianism regards collaborate as the basis of coordinating individuals with others and society. Confucianism requires people to get along well with their parents, brothers and spouse in family. In addition, it requires people to treat their friends with honesty. Besides, it emphasize that “The man of humanity wishing to be successful himself, seeks to help others to be success; wishing to develop himself, seeks to help others to develop” (YANG, 1980, p. 65) “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” (YANG, 1980, p. 123) and “Care for old and young people like they were your family” (YANG, 2000, p. 16). Thirdly, Confucianism targets to construct life order in group life, connects individual value with social value and highlights individual value in group value, rather than focuses on personal gain or loss. Confucianism attaches importance on individual responsibilities and obligations to the group, and the impact of individual behaviors to future generations. It investigates individual value by putting it into group value and judges it based on the individual contribution to the group. Moreover, when there are conflicts between individual benefit and group benefit, it advocates that the former one should obey the latter one.

The concept of “virtue as importance” makes Chinese culture different from western culture. Specifically, Chinese culture emphasizes on individual responsibilities and obligations in human relationships and contends collectivism. However western culture thinks highly of individual independence, freedom and power and advocates individualism. In Chinese ancient time, the concept of “virtue as importance” is suitable for Chinese society in which the family was a producing cell and most of people living by farming. Such kind of society requires some regulations to ensure people can live together in peace. Luckily, the interpersonal laws build by Confucianism meet the above requirements, play positive role in stabilizing society and promoting production, and foster the conscious that individuals should serve for the group. This spirit is also the reason why there are so many honest men in Chinese history.

1.3 Harmony as the Quintessence

Harmony, an important and complex concept consisting of moral goals, moral realm, moral cultivation mode and moral orientation, plays a role in regulating ethical order in Confucianism. Harmony is the best method and state from all moral standards applied to the co-ordination between the various virtues, from individual accomplishment to social order. There are two basic features about it. Firstly, the harmony in Confucianism lies between environment and human, among people and in individual mind, etc.. Secondly, the harmony in Confucianism is neither the simple set of static elements nor unity which erases individuality and ignores principles, but is based on the relationship among all elements, uses benevolence,

righteousness and propriety as criterions to coordinate these elements, and properly cooperates in the dynamic system. It is the synthesis of dynamic and static which not only finds the key point and deals with issues from the whole, comprehensive view but also tackles issues flexibly according to changing objective situation.

Harmony is regarded as the main line and basic spirit of Confucianism. For example, Confucianism justifies ideal personality and perfect social order by objective laws and considers the relation between subjective and objective laws. Furthermore, it utilizes this thinking model to deal with social problems, explore and obey objective laws based on subjective perception. Besides, the harmony in Confucianism represents “big unity” on politics, nation, thought and culture. In early days, Confucian recognized the benefits of national unity to social development. Zhongshu Dong in Han dynasty sublimated the illustration of “big unity” and added philosophy to it. From then on, “big unity” becomes the consensus of Chinese society, and plays the special role in safeguarding national unity and opposing national splitting.

2. FUNCTIONS ON SPIRIT OF CONFUCIAN CORE CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOFT POWER OF CULTURE

In ancient China, Confucianism was taught in school and had a tremendous profound influence on Chinese people’s spiritual world. Although it has long been used by feudal rulers, it is not merely accessories of feudal ideology and ancient political system. It is cultural creativity and wisdom which accumulate thousands of years of Chinese historical experience and excellent tradition and contains a profound understanding on their social life. If we use the perspective of enhancing soft power of Chinese culture to review “virtue as foundation, group as importance and harmony as quintessence”, we will find that it still has cross-age vitality and constant value beyond history.

2.1 Cohesion

Although the soft power of national culture is unfolded in foreign affairs, it must not merely be shallow decoration for seeing. In order to prolong the life of soft power of national culture, we should make it have strong attractive and cohesive power on folks. Under influence of that appeal and cohesion, Chinese people can form a good domestic spirit, which may enable worldwide people treat us with respect. Otherwise if Chinese people are lack of morality, cheat with each other and are subservient to foreigners, we will lose the source showing the soft power of national culture. That is to say, “we will be slighted by others if we slights ourselves first, home will be destroyed if we destroy it ourselves first, and country will be

invaded if we invade it ourselves first.” (YANG, 2000, p. 170). Therefore, the spirit of Confucianism, consisting of “virtue as foundation, group as importance, and harmony as quintessence,” plays a positive impact on enhancing domestic cohesion and improve Chinese people’s cultural quality in the modern society. Its specific functions represent as follows.

On the one hand, it improves moral standards and coordinates interpersonal relationships. Currently China is developing the market economy, which strengths energy, develops economy as well as brings about some negative influence. For example, people become mercenary when they pursue maximum economic profits, and are indifferent about “value” even forget the moral deadline and take illegal measures to hurt others. Besides, market economic principles, such as equivalent exchange and competition, invade our affective domain which leads to interpersonal alienation and makes people think highly of contracts and ignores morality. Under this circumstance, if we re-advocate the concepts like “virtue”, “group” and “harmony” and reasonably utilize the abundant resources and moral regulations, we will correct bad social influence. In recent years, the emergence of “heat of Confucianism” and “heat of traditions Chinese studies” are quite relevant to this theoretic introspection.

On the other hand, it promotes cultural consciousness and self-confidence. People lost in their mental world when foreign culture swarmed in and domestic culture lapsed during the period of Reform and Opening-up. Some Chinese people disregard advantages of our traditional culture and pursue western culture blindly, and some of them only see disadvantages of western culture, exaggerate functions of Confucianism and have unrealistic illusions on the future of Confucianism. All of them are lack of comprehensive, dialectical understanding on Confucianism, and most of them holding above views carelessly refuse or follow Confucianism when they are in fact in the case of a smattering knowledge on Confucianism. If government or researchers can diffuse relative Confucian knowledge and help people recognize the goodness and badness of Chinese culture, then cultural consciousness and self-confidence will be built up.

2.2 Propaganda

Soft power of national cultural is revealed through interacting with foreigners. “Culture” used to enhance national soft power should have at least three characteristics. Firstly, it must demonstrate national unique features. If national culture is the same as foreign culture, it will not be attractive. Secondly, the meaning of the culture should be rich. The richer it is, the more attractive it will be. Thirdly, it can adapt to the trend of world development and meet the interests of mankind, although it has unique characteristics. Only by this, can it play a long-term foreign influence. Luckily, the cultural spirit of Confucianism covers all three aspects above. In the first

place, the spirit “virtue as foundation” fosters Chinese “virtuous tradition” which is different from western “intellectual tradition”, the spirit “group as importance” creates Chinese collectivism which is different from western individualism and the spirit “harmony as quintessence” unfolds Chinese harmonious thinking method which is different from western thinking way as dualism. In the second place, on the cultural richness, the Confucian spirit “virtue”, “group”, “and harmony” has accompanied by the development of Confucianism for more than 2000 years, the specific formulation and discussing method of which are different with times changing and the influence of which on Chinese society is very rich. If we process relative data and explore them in depth, we will definitely find the reason why Chinese civilization remains today. Finally, on the universality of culture, the spirit “virtue as foundation” and “group as importance” promoted by Confucianism is consistent with our international image of responsibility and the spirit “harmony as quintessence” is consistent with our pursuit of peace and development trend in the world. Moreover, Confucianism is not conflict with western democracy, legality, but is complementary with western personalities, freedom and competition. Therefore, core cultural spirit of Confucianism reveals the unique color, deep foundation, universal value of Chinese culture. The above spirit resources should be paid full attention in the process of the construction of soft power of Chinese culture today.

CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes Confucianism as “virtue as foundation, group as importance and harmony as quintessence” from the perspective of “enhancing soft power of Chinese culture” and points out three elements are neither parallel nor primary-secondary but trine. Moreover it demonstrates that the synthesis of the three elements can represent the essence of Confucianism. They have profound influence in history and their modern value is increasingly highlighted in reality. They can unite people, help Chinese improve moral standards, coordinate interpersonal relationships, and promote cultural self-confidence. On top of this, they can display Chinese culture’s unique characteristic, deep roots and universal value. In conclusion, Confucian culture, which always has substantial influence worldwide, can be helpful tool for constructing soft power of Chinese culture and should be paid adequate attention to explore many effective ways on realizing its functions.

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