

Analysis of the Cultural Duality in Eastern Asia

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Abstract: For a long time, Confucian culture has been synonymous with Chinese culture and Eastern Asian culture. From a historical standpoint, most cultural heritages of Eastern Asia originated in China as one of the oldest civilizations on earth, so the two terms were often used interchangeably to reflect the dominant influences of Chinese cultures on the rest of Eastern Asia. While Confucian philosophy has made itself a single most iconic cultural symbol of Eastern Asia with its emphasis on etiquette and morality, the discussion of whether Confucianism closely represents the substance of Eastern Asian culture has rarely been evaluated with a particular historical context. Under the fundamental social transitions from aristocracy in the Zhou dynasty to a unified dictatorship in Qin Dynasty, Confucian thoughts themselves were challenged by other anti-Confucian ideologies that seek compatibility with the changing regimes. The most notable of them is a school of thought known as Legalism. As two completely split views, both Confucianism and Legalism have been deeply intertwined in the history of China and eventually integrated into the complex cultural identities of Eastern Asians. The causes and implications of the existence of such contrary duality in the cultures of early China and later Eastern Asia will be the topics of interest in the paper.

Keywords: Confucianism, Legalism, Eastern Asian Culture, Cultural Duality, Ancient Regime

1. Introduction

Confucianism and Legalism both emerged at the height of the “so-called Hundred Schools of Thought” during the period of fragmented warfare states between the decentralized Zhou dynasty and the later authoritarian Qin dynasty that unified China for the first time with its centralized administration [1]. Influential thinkers of both schools of philosophical thought put forward contrasting theories to address the causes of political upheavals, especially with regard to the demise of the Zhou dynasty. Politically, compared to Confucian ideals that advocate administrative justice and ethics as the guiding principles of state governance with the assumption of born human goodness, Legalism assumed the evilness of humanity and stressed administrative security as the priority in ruling a state. Since then, the constant battles between Confucianism and Legalism have always ended up inconclusive as they both have embodied the genuine endeavors for people to discover the ideal form of political philosophy for Eastern Asia.

In one of his poems to assess the ancient Chinese dynasties, Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic of China, wrote “A hundred generations have all used Qin’s governance methods

[2]. As a progressive critic of Confucian values, Chairman Mao directly pointed out the fundamental controversies between Confucian teachings and the nature of political institutions throughout the history of China. What does it mean? As the first centralized state in China, Qin suppressed freedom of speech and intellectual breakthroughs as the emperor demanded the burning of all classic works including those Confucian books. The only exception was the records related to Legalism as the only school of philosophy backed up by Qin rulers. More importantly, centralized political structures in China and the rest of Eastern Asia lasted thousands of years following Qin. Therefore, a dual state of culture has culminated in Eastern Asia as Legalism represents the essential portion that dictates the practical matters while Confucian signifies the superficial aspect that reflects the individual pursuit of higher moral grounds.

2. Analysis of the Cultural Duality in Eastern Asia

2.1. Background: Unresolved Dispute Between Confucianism and Legalism

The cultural legacies of Confucianism and Legalism in Eastern Asia can be dated back to the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States, a special historical period that critically transitioned ancient China from aristocratic rulership to a centralized form of government. The opposing political logic behind the two fundamentally different political systems gave birth to Confucian and Legalist thoughts that attempted to explain the rationales behind a successful state. Particularly, Confucianism favored the return to the Zhou dynasty that ran a system of enfeoffment in which the powers of the emperors were distributed among the feudal princes who delivered the instructions to the regional clans. With its emphasis on hierarchical social structures and benevolent governance, the Confucian school supported Zhou's system of civilized autocracy that limited the power of the rulers and promoted the formation of civil groups. On the other hand, Legalist theories opposed the Confucian assumption of good human nature and believed in achieving unity through absolute power of the rulers as "a means to control human nature" of the ruled [3].

From a historical perspective, Legalism essentially reinforced the substance of centralization from the Qin dynasty all the way to the Qing dynasty for a history of over two thousand years. For almost all the time after Qin unified China, the advocacy of Confucian thoughts had been proved incompatible with the prevalent political structures and the practical means of interactions between the ruling classes and their subjects. As a result, the practical utilities of Confucianism had been minimal throughout the prolonged time in Eastern Asia.

However, Confucianism has become a dominating cultural characteristic of Eastern Asia for two reasons. For one, the Han dynasty, under the leadership of the seventh emperor named Wu, implemented administrative policies to "dismiss hundred schools of thought and revere only the Confucian arts" [4]. Through these acts, Confucianism was made the only official study in the regime and remained a legacy for many later dynasties down the road. For over a thousand years, in order to serve as public officials, the applicants must pass a series of examinations that test familiarity and comprehension of Confucian works. The persistent worship and appreciation of Confucian thoughts have never ceased in the long history of China despite the vicissitude of regimes. Nevertheless, it is important to see the common motives behind Qin's denouncement of Confucianism and Han's formal adoption of it: the need to centralize and stabilize the rule with censorship of speech and the spread of information. Simply, the emperors of Qin asked its people to read no books while the emperors of Han asked them to read only one book. Regardless of the controversial appearances of these public policies, the ruling logic of centralization had been consistent from Qin to Han and to all dynasties that followed along.

As a result, while it appeared that Confucian philosophies had won the race against Legalism when Confucian art had been restored since the Han after Qin destroyed most Confucian works, as

well as other classics, Legalism, with its strong emphasis on the nature of centralized government, had in fact replaced Confucianism as the guiding principles of social and political matters for over two thousand years.

The other reason that propelled Confucianism to its unique place in Eastern Asian culture involves the appealing Confucian traditions on social and family relationships that continue to be valued by Eastern Asians. As an agriculture-led society, China had a strong tradition of clans and families with hierarchal structures that not only brought order but also protection against external threats as a collective body. The formation of groups based on kinship had allowed many Chinese to form unities that resisted the power principles of the stranger society for thousands of years. The collective powers found in intimate relationships are still widely recognized in Eastern Asian societies today.

2.2. Confucianism: Contradiction Between Virtue and Social Bureaucracy

The foundation of Confucian ideas is based on the assumption that humanity is innately good as they are born with certain discernments to pursue good while abandoning evil. With the principle of ethical centralism, Confucianism stresses the importance of righteousness and justifiable means over power and status to achieve goals. Politically, a rule of benevolence is promoted by Confucian supporters who think of themselves as the teachers of the kings. With better knowledge of goodness and justice, they become responsible for teaching the rulers the strategies and operations of the governance. Interestingly, the Confucian approach to placing the “way” above all secular matters is like Plato’s views on the roles of philosophers in a state: they either sit at the top of the pyramid above the mighty king to help rule the state with their superior knowledge of goodness or they refrain themselves from any political involvements and focus on exploration of truth alone [5]. There are no middle grounds. Both Confucian and Plato would agree that man with rare attributes to always distinguish between the good and the bad despite constant distractions better fit to be the ruler.

Confucianism wants society to find a virtuous and capable man to take over the role of a ruler who not only masters the means of running a state but also possesses the moral obligation to ensure administrative justice. More importantly, Confucian believes managerial policies adopted by the ruler must conform to the “Mandate of the Heaven”, or the divine will that embodies the eternal principles that dictate the workings of the universe [6]. To Confucius, the ability to earn the aid of “Tian”, or the heavenly wills is critical to creating prosperity for the state and preventing the collapse of the regime. Therefore, Confucius asks Chinese emperors to submit to the wills of “Tian”, or heaven, and respond to the voices of the people with benevolence. And when it is time to appoint a successor, the emperor must pass the reign to another sage-like man who “shares his commitment to Confucian principles and the well-being of the people [7]. Similarly, a system of selection by virtue rather than nepotism applies to the appointment of other government officials as well.

However, many issues arise with the system due to the uncertainty in the assessment of virtue as an abstract concept. How do you determine which candidate gets promoted to the next level without an objective score? With the increase in population and complexity of the bureaucratic structures, a lot of “performance arts” and absurd dramas were played by those demonstrating virtues with exaggerated efforts to get to higher positions and salaries. For example, people who practiced Xiao, or filial piety for over twenty years, placed luxury burial items or even buried the living for motives of personal gains rather than the righteousness conveyed in Confucian teachings [8]. The observations of the ridiculous social phenomenon raised serious questions about the Confucian assumption of good human nature. It seems like the desire for power and wealth can easily expose the other side of humanity that is difficult to be restrained by individual morals and ethical cultivation, so law and public powers have their values.

Throughout the history of China, the Zhou dynasty had been the only regime that strictly operated under the frameworks of Confucianism. In the Zhou dynasty, power was distributed between Zhou Tian Zi, the “son of Heaven” or the emperors, and the feudal lords who were the heads of their jurisdictions [9]. Promoted by Confucian ideas, the patriarchal clan system played a large role in the political structure of Zhou as all the administrative regions from the largest, the country, to the smallest, the family were all organized in hierarchal groups that defended their own ways instead of practicing strict obedience to the feudal princes or the emperors. The relationships between the rulers and their subjects in Zhou were not as authoritarian and top-down as those in regimes with highly centralized powers in the following two thousand years. Confucian pursuit of morality and the heavenly way was embodied in the people of Zhou as they, normally as groups, retained independent wills and ethical judgment in the face of authorities. Particularly, the instructions and commands from the Zhou Tian Zi had to go through layers of political entities including feudal states, regional governments, and local clans before they can be enforced locally.

The clan system brought collective order and the emergence of civic groups, but it became a problem when too many interest groups were unified under the clan leaders against any external forces including the orders issued by the emperors. The influx of such factions around the state made it virtually impossible to implement unified and effective management for a large empire state. The words of emperors rarely reached the civilian level through all the defensive networks of organized groups. The resistance of the clans to enact the orders from the central government was analogous to the relationship between federal and state governments in the US. In the US, there is a separation of power between federal and state administrations in which federal laws and executive orders are not strictly enforced at the state level. Indeed, the system allows much greater autonomy at the state level, but the political process involved can make it much less efficient to implement consistent policies nationwide, especially when responding to national emergencies like the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020. Despite the prevalence and propound influence of Confucian studies throughout the history of China and Eastern Asia, the Zhou dynasty was the only one that put Confucian philosophies into practice. As China and Eastern Asia began to adopt centralized governance since Qin, Confucianism had been a theory on paper while Legalism served as the practical ideal.

2.3. Legalism: An Unconditional Obedience

The school of Legalism emerged as an influential alternative to Confucianism as China transitioned from age of consanguinity to unification after the fall of the Zhou dynasty in 771 B.C. Learning from the demise of Zhou, Legalists argue that to maintain order in a large state, the despotic imperial power must break clan ties and act directly on every corner of the land. The idea of Legalism regards intimate and complex relationships among clans and independent social organizations as the fundamental political gridlocks that fragment the state. Essentially, the political structure must be highly hierarchical to enable the emperor’s direct control of its people.

Under Legalism, the most important move to ensure administrative security is to break the firm patriarchal clan system. Public policies to impose heavy taxes on families with two or more adult men and to encourage relatives, or even husbands and wives, to report each other for misdemeanors are necessary for regimes striving to centralize powers. These measures not only help break up the remnants of extended families but also the connections between members of the social groups. For those who studied Chinese history, the weak family ties in favor of political commitments proposed by Legalism had carried over from the authoritarian rule of the Qin dynasty all the way to the Cultural Revolution. Unlike Confucianism, the primary concern of Legalism is the security of the regime as a realistic issue rather than ethical or religious regard.

Politically, Legalism emphasizes the self-interest and the inclination of humans to not do good as moral considerations alone are not sufficient to contain the selfish nature. Therefore, government officials must practice absolute obedience and loyalty in the administrative hierarchy not through benevolent relationships but through the pursuit of self-interest and mutual benefits. The primary distinction of legalist views is that benevolence and justice are neither the indispensable obligations of the rulers nor the conditions for loyalty from the subordinates. As Woodrow Wilson titles in his book, “Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice”, anything less than absolute loyalty means absolutely no loyalty [10]. Similarly, the Yongzheng Emperor, one of the most diligent emperors in the Qing dynasty, said to a minister who appreciated his kindness, “just do what you are supposed to do, the emperor’s kindness is not your concern. Loyalty is the best virtue.” Qing was the last imperial dynasty in Chinese history. For over two thousand years, centralized governance and its compatible legalist interpretations prevailed over Confucianism as the practical philosophy of China and Eastern Asia.

2.4. Cultural Diffusion: from China to Eastern Asia

As mentioned earlier, Confucianism and Legalism were two contrary yet complementary schools of philosophy that originated in China and quickly spread across Eastern Asia. The significant cultural influences of China on other parts of Eastern Asia have been agreed upon among the public. For example, the aristocrats of most Korean kingdoms studied the teachings of Confucius in Chinese characters. In fact, written Korean was not invented until the mid-fifteenth century. The Joseon, the last dynastic kingdom of the Korean Peninsula, had remained loyal to China’s Ming dynasty which was arguably the most centralized regime in the history of China [11]. In Japan, Chinese characters are preserved as a key component of the Japanese writing system today. Meanwhile, the request to pay absolute reverence and submission to the Emperor of Japan has remained a major Japanese cultural trait that reflects the core beliefs of Legalism. Across Eastern Asia, Confucianism has been openly observed as the ideal form of moral standards while legalism has continued to dominate social and political realms.

3. Conclusion

The historical development of Eastern Asia has been accompanied by the coexistence of Confucianism which points to individual ethics and Legalism which places the value of law and order over moral obligations. Confucian ideas are overly positive regarding the capability of humans to abide by moral principles over self-interest. Furthermore, Confucianism fails to address the need to force others to perform moral obligations as the defective end of humanity has been overshadowed by the concept of benevolence. On the other hand, although Legalism serves as a more pragmatic framework of centralized governments that have been the prevalent mode of administration in both the history and modern societies of Eastern Asia, it fails to justify the legitimacy of the relationship between the ruler and its people other than individual selfishness. The two unreconciling philosophies create common cultural duplicity among Eastern Asians as a result of prolonged historical conflicts between the publicly recognized cultures and the essence of how the societies operated.

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