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The Confucian Concept of Humane Governance

Now that China is busy reclaiming its own cultural past, the Confucian concept of humane governance is surfacing again in a strongly ideologized context. It is therefore important to recount in a critical light the fundamental tenets of the Chinese classical thought on governance (Lecture 1), and to assess their revival and implementation in the modern and contemporary perspective (Lecture 2).

Lecture 1:

What kind of influence or coercion might be exerted on a human community so as to make it rally to a leader or, at least, accept a minimal degree of consensus? This is a question that was raised at a very early stage in China and has never ceased ever since to nourish philosophical inquiries as well as institutional practices. Whereas political theories in Europe, starting from ancient Greece and Rome, have endeavoured to devise conceptual models for achieving order to be enacted in the body politic, various traditions in China, notably Confucian, have conceived of the internal diffusion of an organizing principle radiating from the centre. Such a conception has led to the vision of an organic world animated by a ‘harmonious’ or self-regulating principle (which can be subsumed under the concept of “humaneness”, ren 仁), rather than to the definition of a distinct political space within which citizenship is thought of in terms of specific functions and responsibilities.

Traditional Chinese/Confucian political concepts—such as the concepts of sovereignty and charismatic virtue—do not countenance any strong distinction between the features and functions of virtue (de 德) and the features and function of proper political authority. Some of the doctrinal or conceptual implications of this condition are to be noted, the most salient of which is that those working within this network of concepts cannot easily delimit a separate political sphere, which takes the form of institutions and formal structures that are then applied to society as a separate entity or object. This is a way of conceiving of order in the
body politic whereby political influence is “diffused” from a central figurehead-on-high, so that people who model themselves on this figurehead will be inclined to harmonize themselves through informal and generally extra-institutional means. Confucian ritualism in its totality has therefore never succeeded in producing a form of civil society, precisely due to there being no separation between moral and political spheres. According to Confucians thinkers, being human means being moral (according, however, to an ideal decided by an elite). The founding political myths of ancient China have tended to fuse virtue and politics into one, posing a serious problem for the constitution of a nation-state in the modern era.

Lecture 2:

Over the past century and a half, Confucianism has undergone numerous transformations, including the risk of disappearing altogether. In particular, the issue of the possibility for Confucian China to develop a democratic political system has been hotly debated, both by Chinese and Western theoreticians. Among the numerous propositions that have emerged, one of the most prominent is the attempt made by some “new Confucians” (most of them chose to be exiled to Hong Kong or Taiwan after the 1949 Communist takeover) to delve into the resources offered by the Chinese intellectual tradition with a view to dig out indigenous antecedents of democracy.

Ever since the 1980s, when mainland China in its post-Maoist phase jumped in its turn on the “new Confucian bandwagon”, such mobilization of traditional culture has taken a rather more aggressive turn, with the search for a specifically “Chinese way”. It is the traditional view of “China as a world” which, after having been jeopardized by colonial powers at the end of the nineteenth century, is once again becoming a type of nostalgic self-representation and a unifying factor in the predominant ideology of a “Greater China”, and which is now being opposed as a kind of “Chinese universality” (with the concept of humane governance at its core) against the Western universality of human rights.