Comparing Liberalism and Confucianism, from the Perspective of Multiculturalism

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Introduction: from the perspective of multiculturalism

1. Contradiction between liberalism and multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a new trend of political thinking in the West, to a large extent contrary to liberalism which has been holding a dominant position in the sphere of political philosophy for centuries. The difference lies primarily in the contradiction between the assertion of individual right on the part of liberalism and the proposition of group (cultural) right on the part of multiculturalism. Liberalism criticizes multiculturalism that emphasizing group right might be detrimental to the freedom and right of individuals either inside or outside of the concerned group. Multiculturalism criticized that liberalism per se is de facto embedded in Western cultural which has been occupying an advantageous position in the society.

2. Dilemma of the controversy

It seems that there is a dilemma in the controversy between liberalism and multiculturalism: both argue for 'right', either of individual or of group; neither can really deny the justification of the other. Moreover, even though the terminology is 'multiculturalism', the theory does not seem to really concern the content of those cultures other than the 'Western culture'. As many authors rightly claimed, multiculturalism intends not a complete divergence from but rather an exploration within

liberal tradition. Actually, similar to liberalism, multiculturalism as a philosophical thinking is not really belonging to any culture other than the 'West'.

3. Objective of the study

With the accelerating pace of globalization, interactions between different cultures have become a very important social phenomenon. This is the case both within the boundaries of the state and among states of different cultures. Rather than strictly following the methodological model of Western political thinking, it might help to deal with the multicultural situation we are today facing by comparing the 'content' of different cultures to see to what extent they can coexist peacefully. This paper will try to compare the political philosophy of liberalism and Confucianism, which are/were backed by Western and Chinese culture respectively, notwithstanding the fact that liberalism is essentially the thinking of modern western world and much more complicated and well constructed than Confucianism which prevailed mainly in ancient China.

Part II iberalism

1. Hobbes' state of nature and the Leviathan

Hobbes, the founder of modern Western political philosophy, is also regarded as the first thinker of liberalism. In his theoretical hypothesis, the state of nature, each individual has absolute right to preserve oneself, and the result is war of all against all. A commonwealth is designed to allow human being get out of this miserable situation through a social contract, in which each and all individuals agree to forsake their right to use violence and to give it to the political power, the Leviathan, the duty of which is to maintain civil peace. Hobbes' theory actually presupposes the existence and autonomy of civil society. People are free to do everything

else on condition that they do not try to take over the power they give to the Leviathan. The end of political power is to guarantee the security of society. Political Power does not have to interfere the activities of civil society.

2. Individual right and liberty

Individual right is the core concept of liberalism. Closely related to it is the concept of liberty. Locke, in his *Letter on Toleration*, argues for religious toleration and separation between the church and the state. He says to the governor not to try to impose your belief on people and let them adopt what they want to adopt. Religious toleration is the way to conceive unified entity out of the plurality of religious opinions. Later on liberalism extended this principle from the sphere of religion to all spheres of social life. According to John Stuart Mill, freedom means that you can do whatever you want to do as long as you do not undermine other's liberty, that is, as long as you do not violate the law. Isaiah Berlin argues that the concept of liberty or freedom in liberalism is of negative sense. It does not consist in saying what to do; within the framework of laws individual should be able to pursue different ends in life without interference by other persons.

3. liberal constitutional state

For liberalism, only individual right is ultimate, state power can only get its legitimacy from this ultimate origin, and its end is to guarantee individual right. Liberalism is very much concerned with the threats to individual freedom that come from public authority. Montesquieu, in his *The Spirit of Laws*, expounds the principle of separation and balance of powers. He points out that there can be no liberty if all the powers are united in the same person or in the same body of magistrates.

Montesquieu' theory was very useful in the fighting against absolute power of monarchs. On the other hand, Constant, in his *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, criticizes Rousseau's republicanism. He points out that collective notion of liberty related to direct democracy belongs to an ancient time; liberty of the moderns in a commercial society is essentially an individual notion, what it requires is representative democracy and liberal constitutional state to protect individuals to pursue freely their private ends. He says: 'When you establish that the sovereignty of the people is unlimited, you creates and tosses at random into human society a degree of power which is too large in itself, and which is bound to constitute an evil, in whatever hands it is be placed.' (1)

4. social right and welfare state

With the advance of industrial revolution, the liberal idea of noninterference and absolute value of economic liberty became prevailing. However, the golden age of liberal capitalism also witnessed the total disposition of society with the apparition of a working class. At the same time, overproduction and recession began to appear periodically. Socialism came into being and strongly condemned liberalism as the culprit of the miserable situation. Proudhon, who defines himself as liberal socialist, makes the distinction between formal liberty and real liberty. Formal liberty is liberty <u>from</u> interference by other human beings; economic laws are not something which makes you not free as far as formal liberty is concerned. Real liberty is liberty <u>to</u> act, to become an agent in society, to transform yourself and become what you are; the means of real liberty have to be provided by society.

Confronted with contenders, liberalism had to transcend itself and respond both historically and conceptually. The concern is that government should find way to compromise between liberty and equality; liberty should be distributed on an equal basis within a society; no body should be deprived of the possibility of conceiving proper ends; society in a bad condition is not stable; state has to provide some minimum level of social security, such as education, medical care, etc. John Rawls discusses the concept of equal opportunity and social justice. According to Rawls, it is regarded as just if wealth is divided unequally within certain limits, that is, the situation of worst-off will be better. In this case, you let people do their business so that the general wealth will continue to grow, and only a small interference from the government is needed to guarantee a fair share for the worst-off by providing basic goods, the condition for action as a real agent of society.

Part II Confucianism (2)

1. Confucius' ren (仁) and li(礼)

The core concept of Confucius' philosophy is ren. The Chinese character of ren is composed of two characters, one means human, and the other means two. Confucius uses this concept to define the complete or perfect human virtue in their relationship with one another. He teaches the meaning of ren differently at different occasions, as, among others, loving your fellow human, filial piety, loyalty, wisdom, courageousness, respectfulness, magnanimity, sincerity, earnestness, kindness, etc. Another important concept in Confucius philosophy is li ($\mbox{$\stackrel{\uparrow}{\land}$}$), the meaning of which is also very wide, such as the rules of proper conduct, customs, ceremonial rites, as well as political institutions. These two concept, Ren and li, are closely related to each other. On the one hand without propriety, human virtues can become faults. In the Analects ($\mbox{$\stackrel{\downarrow}{\land}$}$), Confucius says: 'respectfulness uncontrolled by li (here means the rules of proper conduct) becomes labored effort, caution uncontrolled by li becomes

timidity, boldness uncontrolled by li becomes insubordination, uprightness uncontrolled by li becomes rudeness...' (3) On the other hand, proper conduct is meaningless without being virtuous. Confucius says: 'when a man is not virtuous, of what account is his li (here li means ceremonial manners)?': (4) 'plausible speech, an ingratiating demeanor, and fulsome respect···I am ashamed of them.': (5) and that those careful hypocrite are the thieves of virtue.' (6) For Confucius, both ren and li pertain not only to individual morality but also to politics. When Yanyuan, one of his best disciples, asked him about ren, he answered: 'to take upon yourself the mission of restoring the system of li (here li means the social and political institutions of Zhou dynasty) is ren'. When Yanyuan continued asking about the features of ren, he answered: 'if not in accordance with li, do not look, if not in accordance with li, do not listen; if not in accordance with li, do not speak; if not in accordance with li, do not act. (7) The logic of ren might be described as 'do not do to others what you do not like yourself, (8) and 'to sustains others while desiring to maintain yourself and develop others while desiring to develop yourself (9)

According to Confucius, those who pursue *ren* should try to become government officials in order to practice and complete *ren*. 'Zixia (one of his disciples) said: the occupant of office, when his duties are finished, should betake himself to study, the student, when his studies are finished, should betake himself to office.' (10) And 'Zilu (one of his disciples) said: ... the reason why the superior man tries to go into office is that he holds this to be right.' (11) Confucius himself also spent many years traveling from one states to another, persuading their rulers to adopt his political thinking, that is, to be a virtuous ruler and to rule according to *li*. Confucius believes that the rule of virtue is above the rule of law; laws and the system of justice are only to supplement the system of Li and moral discipline; punishment without firstly educating the people is tyranny.

When a ruler asked him that 'How about to kill the unprincipled for the good of the principled', Confucius answered: 'What need, Sir, is there of capital punishment in you administration? Is your desire is for good, the people will be good. The moral character of the ruler is the wind; the moral character of those beneath his is the grass. When the grass has the wind upon it, it assuredly bends.' (12)

Confucius regarded ren as lifelong pursuit of individual. He says that: 'ren has its source in oneself; (13) and that 'The determined scholar and the man of virtue do not seek life at the expense of ren. Some even sacrifice their lives to complete ren.' (14) He said of himself that 'As to the sage and the man of perfect virtue, how dare I rank myself with them? It may simply be said of me, that I strive to become such without satiety, and teach others without weariness'. (15) According to Confucius, a virtuous man may differ in his conduct according to situation. Even if you cannot become government official, you can still practice ren. Those qualities such as filial piety and friendliness toward one's brothers are also public service. (16) Confucius exalted one of his disciples, Yanhui, that: 'How admirable was the virtue of Huil With a bamboo dish of rice, a gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, while others could not have endured the distress, he did not allow his joy to be affected by it. How admirable was the virtue of Hui!" (17) As for himself 'there is no inflexible may or may not'. (18) Confucius believes that: 'If my principles are going to prevail, it is through Fate, If my principles are going to fail, it is through Fate.' (19) However, 'I make no complaint against Heaven, nor blame men. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. That who knows me, is it not Heaven?' (20) No wonder some person, a guard, said of him that 'Is he not the one who knows he cannot succeed and keeps on trying to do so?' (21)

2. Mencius' Ren (仁)/virtuous Politics

Though Confucius only says that 'in their original nature men closely resemble each other. in their acquired practices they grow wide apart'. (22) and does not give a clear answer to the problem of human nature, the question of whether human nature is good or evil was later become a major problem of Confucian school, Mencius, the most important successor of Confucius, argues that human nature is good. All men have the feelings of commiseration, shame and dislike, modesty and yielding, right and wrong, which are the beginnings of human-heartedness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom respectively. If these four beginnings are allowed to reach their complete development, he becomes a sage. Nature is what heaven has given to us. 'He who exercised his mind to the utmost, know his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows heaven. To keep one's mind preserved and to nourish one's nature is the way to serve heaven. To be without double-mindedness, whether one is to have untimely death or long life; and having cultivated one's personal character, to wait with this for whatever there may be: this is the way in which he establishes his Heaven-ordained being.' (23)

While most of Confucius's discussions are on self-cultivation of individual, Mencius extends their application to the philosophy of government. According to Mencius, it should be the men of great virtue and worth who constitute the government officials and govern the state and society. The ideal king must be a sage. Since the ideal king has a mind which cannot bear to witness the sufferings of others, he will develop a virtuous government which likewise cannot endure that there are any sufferings. The policies promulgated by the sage king are all on behalf of the people, with the result that the people delight to obey him. Mencius said, 'the people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest.' (24) The

empire will be given to the ruler by Heaven, depending on whether he can gain the heart of the people. Should a so-called ruler fail to gain the people, he has lost which makes him a ruler and become a mere fellow and will be displaced by Heaven.

3. Xunzi's absolute state power

Not like Mencius who speaks of an ethical Heaven, Xunzi, the most important figure in Confucian school after Mencius, regards heaven as the mechanistic nature, and that human nature is evil, goodness is only acquired training. If natural desires are given free rein, the result will be inevitably undesirable; hence desires need to be kept in proper restraint by the mind through its power of cogitation. And if one tries develop one's mind with sincerity and to pursue human virtues and practice righteousness with unswerving singleness of purpose, one will be transformed to a sage.

Notwithstanding that Mencius has the concept of the Will of Heaven with a metaphysical sense while Xunzi remains rational; his political philosophy is much similar to that of Mencius. He says that men is not truly men simply because they alone has too feet and lacks hair, but rather in that they makes social distinctions. Since men have intelligence, they realized that without a social structure people cannot preserve themselves. Intelligent persons thus established the rules of proper conduct and standard of justice in order to rescue people from misfortune and calamity. Xunzi also argues that a true king must be a sage. When the sage king is alive, he should rank people according to their virtue; when he dies, the person who is sufficiently qualified will naturally succeed him. And the power of sage king must be absolute. 'The emperor's authority and position are most honorable, and he has no peer in the empire... his virtue is pure and complete; his wisdom and kindness are most illustrious

··· all living people are moved and obey, and yield to his influence. The empire then has neither recluses nor any neglected good men. What is in accord with his acts is right; what differs from them is wrong.' (25)

Part III comparison between liberalism and Confucianism

1. Difference between liberalism and Confucianism

These two political philosophies are very much different from each other. Firstly, their core concepts are different. The fundamental concept of liberalism is right, which is equally entitled to each and all individuals; individual is free to believe, think, speak, or do whatever he or she likes as long as not violating others' right; the only limit to the liberty of individual is other individuals' equal right to enjoy liberty. On the other hand, the core concept of Confucianism is ren (\sqsubset), which means something like complete human virtue in his relationship with others. Ren positively defines what a man should believe and think, and how he should behave. Even though every one is possible to become a sage, nonetheless only a few can acquire those high human qualities and become morally superior.

Secondly, their state theories are different. According to liberalism, only individual right is ultimate, the end of the state is to guarantee individual right, the legitimacy of the state is derived from this ultimate individual right, the power of the state should not be absolute, and what is required is constitutional state. According to liberalism, the state should be governed by the rule of law; the essence of law is to negatively set a limit on individual freedom in order to protect individual right. Those who work in the government are not supposed to be morally superior to other citizens; their social status is not higher than other professions. On the other hand, according to Confucianism, those morally superior should try to become government officials in order to realize and complete their heavenly-ordained callings; the social status of an individual should be

dependent on his position in the political system as well as his morality. The ruler should be a sage, the sage king should pursue virtuous politics, and his power should be absolute. The government should actively promote the material welfare of the people through benevolent and efficient administration, should positively define social relationships and promote social morality through a system of Li, and must carefully and justly apply the punitive laws.

2. Similarity between liberalism and Confucianism

Although liberalism and Confucianism seem quite different from and even contrary to each other, and notwithstanding their essential chronological difference, some similarities between them can still be drawn. Firstly, both of them essentially denied the legitimacy of feudalism according to which each individual's social status was mostly decided at his birth. The natural right theory of liberalism was essentially a normative one, which in principle guarantees an equal chance for all to participate in the society. Similarly, Confucius says that 'in teaching there should be no class distinction' (26); and it is a fundamental belief in Confucianism that everybody could become a sage, and as long as one tries his best to cultivate and develop oneself, one can go up to a higher social position. Secondly, both believe that government should guarantee some basic means of people's life. In the later development of liberalism, individual right was expanded to include minimum social rights; modern welfare state must provide the minimum means for individual development, such as education, medical care, poverty relief, etc. Economic welfare of the people is a basic concern of Confucianism, one important argument of which is that land should be equally divided to the people so that all people can have the most important means of a good life. Thirdly, both believe that the political power should be

ultimately centralized in the state. This is the case in the principle of state sovereignty of liberalism, and this is also the case in Confucian idea of the unitary authority of the king. Fourthly, both argue for good governance. Liberalism believes in democracy and insists that the head of the nation should be the representative of the people. Confucianism also asserts that the sage king should govern on behalf of the people, and those dictators who lost the heart of the people will be displaced. And fifthly, it is not too much different of liberalism and Confucianism on the idea that there should be a bureaucratic system to govern or to serve the society, and administration should be taken over by those capable persons and they should be rewarded proportionately to their capability and the importance of their position.

3. Further exploration of the comparison

The underlying reason of this seemingly paradoxical comparison between liberalism and Confucianism might lies in their different historically background. Confucianism was the political philosophy for a centralized bureaucratic political system in an ancient agricultural civilization. In that social structure, self sufficient household is the basic economic unit of the society, which explains the reason why family morality such as filial piety became an important concern of the society. Government in that centralized political system played a predominant role in maintaining social order and promoting economic and social prosperity and thus became the most important playground for individuals to realize their ambitions, which explains why Confucianism emphasizes the positive role of the government. On the other hand, liberalism is the political philosophy for a liberal constitutional political system which belongs to modern industrial civilization. In modern society, besides the state, there is an autonomous civil society and self regulating capitalist economy, in

which individual became the basic element of social relationship, and in which the principle of merit rules. The family morality thus retrenched largely to private sphere. And the fundamental role of the government is no longer to dominate the society, but rather, according to the principle of legal equality, to guarantee the basic preconditions of a capitalist free market economy, such as property right, individual freedom, etc. (27) This might be the reason why liberalism is essentially individualism and generally has a conservative idea on the rule of the government.

Conclusion

At last we may draw the conclusion that the underlying difference between liberalism and Confucianism is essentially a methodological one. Hobbes describes the principle of the laws of nature (the natural duties of man deprived from his natural rights) as not to treat others as you do not wish them to treat you. While there are two principles in Confucius' idea of ren (仁): the first one is negative and almost the same as the negative liberal principle, namely, do not do to others what you do not like yourself; the second one is positive: to maintain others while you desire to maintain yourself and to develop others while you desire to develop yourself. Just as liberal belief of individual right and freedom, and correspondingly the rule of laws, have become one of the most important concerns in the modern Western culture, Confucianism occupied the most important position in ancient Chinese culture, and still played a role in modern China. We may conclude that the methodology of Confucianism is to positively promote what one should do while the methodology in modern Western political thinking is to negatively define what you should not do (you are free to do whatever you want to do within this limit). This conclusion does not mean that in Confucianism there is no negative demand; it is clear that the first principle of Confucius' concept of ren is a negative notion. The

problem with Confucianism might be that overemphasis on the positive notion might lead to negligence of the negative one; when individuals as well as the society positively pursue their goals; they might transgress the first negative principle. It also might be wrong to claim that there is no 'positive' belief in Western culture. Among others, Marx Weber's exploration of the relationship between Protestant religion and capitalist spirit as well as Adam Smith's discussion on moral sentiments all provide examples in Western culture which is in a way similar to those positive belief of Confucianism. In Western political philosophy, the methodology is to 'negatively reformulate the positive criteria', to secure the preconditions of positive pursues through the form of contractually guaranteed rights. (28) In order to understand the difference of the political thinking of these two cultures, we might need a much broader perspective. People have been well aware that it is an imperative task for those countries with Confucianism culture to promote the process of democratization and to protect human right. However, their route of modernization might not be the same as that of the West given the difference of their historical and cultural background.

And from this comparison, we might be able to draw some implications on the discussion of multiculturalism. Firstly, each culture has its particular characteristics, and because of this particularity, no model can be universally applied; on the other hand, since all societies are human society, we can always draw some universality from particularity, and due to this universality, different cultures can interact with and learn from each other. Secondly, culture is not a definite thing itself and all cultures are in the constant process of transformation and evolution; this complex process cultural evolution is taking place both individually and collectively. Thirdly, since there are more than one culture in this world, there will be kind of unbalancement between the progress of each

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culture, which constitutes a very important stimulus for evolution of each culture; but it is those individuals and collectively the people of certain culture who should be the subject of the evolution of its own culture, and the unbalanced situation should not become the excuse for unequal relationship between different cultural groups. Fourthly, in today's world of globalization, multicultural situation is a matter of fact, and this situation is much different from traditional relationships of comparatively independent or isolated cultures; multiculturalism as a new trend of political thinking is to deal with this situation; each culture should regard others as equal, and the concept of cultural right probably should be understood as a negative notion which is to guarantee the precondition for free evolvement of all cultures and for the real integration of human race.

Notes

- Benjamin Constant, Political Writings, trans. and ed. by Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 176.
- (2) The English translation of the quotations from Analects, Mencius, and Xunzi are mostly from Fung Lu-lan's A History of Chinese Philosophy, with some revision by the author of this paper. The original Chinese version will also be given in the footnotes.
- (3) FUNG Yu-lan, A History of Chinese Philosophy, translated by Derk Bodde. Princeton: Princeton University Press. P. 68. (子曰:"恭而无礼则劳,慎而无礼则葸,勇而无礼则乱,直而无礼则绞。···" Analects of Confucius, VIII, 2).
- (4) Ibid. P. 66. (子曰: "人而不仁,如礼何?" Analects of Confucius, III,8).
- (5) Ibid. P. 67. (子曰:"巧言, 令色, 足恭…丘亦耻之。"Analects of Confucius, V, 24)
- (6) Ibid. P. 69 (子曰:"乡原,德之贼也。"Analects of Confucius, XVII, 13).
- (7) Ibid. P. 71. (颜渊问仁。子曰:"克己复礼为仁。一日克己复礼,天下归仁焉…"颜渊曰:"请问其目?"子曰:"非礼勿视,非礼勿听,非礼勿言,非礼勿动。"Analects of Confucius, XII. 1)
- (8) Ibid. P. 71. ("己所不欲, 勿施于人。"Analects of Confucius, XII, 2)
- (9) Ibid, P.70. ("夫仁者,己欲立而立人;己欲达而达人。"Analects of Confucius, VI, 28)
- (10) Ibid. P. 52. (子夏曰; 仕而优则学, 学而优则仕 Analects of Confucius, XIX,13)。
- (11) Ibid. P. 74. (子路曰: "···君子之仕也, 行其义也。道之不行, 已知之矣。"Analects of

- Confucius, XVIII, 7)
- (12) Ibid. P. 60. 子为政,焉用杀,子欲善而民善矣,君子之德风,小人之德草,草上风必偃 Analects of Confucius, XII, 19)
- (13) Ibid. P. 71. ("为仁由己" Analects of Confucius, XII. 1)
- (14) 子曰: "志士仁人, 无求生以害仁, 有杀身以成仁。"Analects of Confucius, XV, 8
- (15) Ibid. P. 72. 子曰: ("若圣与仁,则吾岂敢。抑为之不厌,诲人不倦,则可谓云尔已矣。" Analects of Confucius, VII, 33)
- (16) Ibid. P. 64. ("《书》云:'孝乎惟孝, 友于兄弟, 施于有政。'是亦为政, 奚其为为政?" Analects of Confucius, II, 21)
- (17) (子曰: "贤哉回也!一箪食,一瓢饮,在陋巷,人不堪其忧,回也不改其乐。贤哉回也!" Analects of Confucius, VI, 11)
- (18) Ibid. P. 74. ("无可无不可" Analects of Confucius, XVIII, 8)
- (19) Ibid. P. 58. (道之将行也与,命也;道之将废也与,命也 Analects of Confucius, XIV, 38)
- (20) Ibid. P. 57. (不怨天,不尤人,下学而上达,知我者其天乎。Analects of Confucius, XIV, 37)
- (21) Ibid. P. 74. ("是知其不可而为之者与?"Analects of Confucius, XIV, 41)
- (22) Ibid. P. 75. (子曰:"性相近也, 习相远也。"Analects of Confucius, XVII, 2)
- (23) Ibid. P. 129. (孟子曰:"尽其心者,知其性也。知其性,则知天矣。存其心,养其性,所以事天也。 殀寿不贰,修身以俟之,所以立命也。"Mencius VIIa, 1)
- (24) Ibid. P. 113. (民为贵, 社稷次之, 君为轻。Mencius, VIIb, 14)
- (25) Ibid. P. 302 (天子者, 埶位至尊, 无敌于天下, 夫有谁与让矣?道德纯备, 智惠甚明, 南面而听天下, 生民之属莫不震动从服以化顺之。天下无隐士, 无遗善, 同焉者是也, 异焉者非也。Xunzi, XVII, 正论篇第十八)
- (26) Ibid. P. 49. (有教无类 Analects of Confucius, XV, 38)
- (27) Axel Honneth, in Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange, defines three normative sphere specific principles of social justice in modern liberal democratic society, that is, the principles of love, legal equality, and social esteem.
- (28) Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange. P.188-189

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