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Reclaiming Postmodern Confucianism through Narrative and Edification

This paper has two main objectives. The first is to revitalize the notion of postmodern Confucianism after an interval of two decades by reviewing the early encounters between postmodern philosophy and traditional Confucian philosophy in the late 20th century. The second is to pursue and clarify two key points of postmodern Confucianism: that postmodern Confucianism is a kind of narrative philosophy, and that it is an edifying philosophy.

Obviously, postmodern Confucianism represents a coming together of Western postmodern philosophy and traditional Confucian philosophy. The possibility of postmodern Confucianism is deeply intriguing and somewhat provocative, and it is a topic well worth our attention.

As far as postmodernism is understood as a philosophical trend, it initially took form in the middle and late 20th century, while Confucian philosophy first emerged more than 2000 years ago. As a basic philosophical perspective, postmodern philosophy represents a Western style of questioning modernity and its many related issues, even as its roots extend far back in ancient Western philosophy. Traditional Chinese Confucianism, on the other hand, has produced important theoretical achievements concerning the problems of premodern society, but this has not stopped many scholars from exploring the contemporary significance of Confucianism in recent years. The question of why we choose to advance the concept of postmodern Confucianism in the 2020s calls for a clear response.

Reviving the project of postmodern Confucianism marks the thoughtful effort to resume this very project that ought not to have been dismissed earlier in the end of the 20th century.

Chinese philosophers first encountered postmodern philosophy in the late 1970s, together with Western philosophy, Western culture, Western art, Western education, and the Western life style, after which it gradually started to impact many other disciplines as well as the life of ordinary people. Postmodernism, a term shrouded in obscurity, aroused a sense of freshness and curiosity among Chinese scholars of that time, and many were those who enthusiastically recommended its challenging ideas. In 1985, the American champion of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, visited China and delivered a series of lectures on postmodern theory and postmodern culture, which impressed many of the Chinese scholars who were present for them. In general, however, Chinese scholars did not pursue any sustained theoretical research on postmodernism until the early 1990s, and there were very few serious works that were published on the topic.

From the early 1990s to the early twenty-first century, research into and dissemination of the important thought of postmodernism by Chinese mainland scholars reached a height that can be perceived from the following points:

First, a large number of classic works of postmodern philosophy were translated into Chinese, including *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (by Jean-Francois Lyotard), *Just Gaming* (by Jean-Francois Lyotard), *The Postmodern Turn* (by Ihab Hassan), *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (by David Ray Griffin), *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions* (by David Ray Griffin), *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner), *History of Madness* (by Michael Foucault), and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (by Michael Foucault). Almost all of these classic works as well as other important

research pieces on postmodernism published abroad have been translated into Chinese and published here.

Second, in that same period, a solid collection of academic papers and other research works composed in Chinese and published here. Some of those papers and works have exerted a notable academic impact, including the *Study on Culture of Postmodernism*, the *Complicated and Confusing Games*, the *Postmodern Scientific Realism*, the *Bewilderment and Reflection in the Humanities: A Critique of the Western Postmodern Trend*, the *Centre and Margin*, and the *Derrida—The Way of Deconstruction*. With its influence expanding in China, postmodern philosophy achieved more understanding and respect and motivated some different thinking among Chinese scholars. It was around this time that some experts and scholars in Chinese philosophy had begun to notice the relationship between postmodernism and Chinese philosophy. Some of them started to think about the contemporary significance of Western postmodernism's turn toward Chinese philosophy. They reckoned postmodern philosophy to be an inevitable result following from Western rationalism's movements towards the extreme, an unremarkable philosophical phenomenon in the post-industrial era. Their reactions to the changes in its philosophical viewpoints led them to think that the significance of the turn lied in changing its focus from a concentration on the external investigation of nature to a focus on the meaning of the lives of humans. Clearly, for them, postmodern philosophy and Chinese philosophy have obvious thematic overlap.

Other scholars went even further and put forward the idea of "Chinese postmodernism" (see Li, 1999). It was suggested that many propositions in postmodern philosophy were highly compatible with some ideas of traditional Chinese philosophy, for example those about changeability, harmony and integration, the view of reincarnation or the absence of finality of lives, and the conception of the integration of humans and nature. From their standpoint, Chinese scholars were expected to properly summarize and refine the unique values of Chinese philosophy in the interweaving of modernity and postmodern culture, and to carry it forward into the 21st century (see Xiang, 2001). Some experts on Chinese philosophy asserted that postmodern philosophy, which originated from the West, had gradually come to show a strong presence in the study of Chinese culture. In their view, postmodern philosophy is dissatisfied with Western centralism, and it emphasizes the significance of national differences amid pluralistic interactions in cultural development. That too had a positive impact on the pursuit of cultural origins and subjective consciousness in the philosophy of Confucianism (see Li, 2005). If that line of exploration and inquiry had been continued, then the relationship between postmodern philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy, but particularly Confucianism, certainly would have been discussed more intensively and extensively, such that the ideas and theories of postmodern Confucianism would have naturally assumed its place in the Chinese and Western philosophic communities.

However, neither Chinese nor Western scholars had continued to explore that line of inquiry, and relevant work seemed to have come to a stop rather abruptly. The result was that the concept of postmodern Confucianism has not been clearly or fully discussed for some time now. In a manner of speaking, traditional Confucian philosophy and postmodern philosophy brushed against each other at the beginning of the 21st century, without really manifesting any substantial resonance, exchange, interaction, and union, let alone any profound development in the important concept of postmodern Confucianism, rendering it hanging by itself.

Chinese scholars of that time did not continue in their efforts to further explore the notion of postmodern Confucianism mainly due to the following reasons: first, the influence of postmodern philosophy was gradually permeating various fields in China at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The ideas of postmodern philosophy were intertwined with literature and art, education, architectural concept, popular culture, consumer culture and so on, playing a multifaceted and complex influence. On the one hand, that endowed postmodernism with a comprehensive influence in many fields of Chinese social life, and for a while, the term "post-" itself became a popular word. On the other hand, Chinese scholars seemed to have

relaxed their focus on postmodern philosophy and made little effort to discuss it. In other words, Chinese scholars had made great efforts in the practical application of postmodernism, but they paid less attention to the actual study of postmodern philosophy itself, one of the more difficult and complex areas of modern inquiry. Because of the influence of this attitude, it was virtually impossible for Chinese scholars of that time to carry out meticulous research on such edge-cutting and challenging academic issues like postmodern Confucianism. Second, among the academic division of disciplines peculiar to mainland China, the discipline of philosophy comprises eight second-level disciplines, including Marxist philosophy, Chinese philosophy, foreign philosophy, ethics, logic, aesthetics, etc. Its relevant academic activities include teaching and research work, applying for research subjects, training postgraduates, awarding degrees, etc., all of which precisely depend on the division of those secondary disciplines, and academics also largely rely on the secondary disciplines to which they belong to form and cultivate their own academic communities. Generally speaking, in the field of philosophy, Chinese work on post-modern philosophy is mainly performed by those who are trained in foreign philosophy as a secondary discipline, while work on traditional Confucian philosophy is performed by those who are trained in Chinese philosophy as a secondary discipline. They come from different academic backgrounds and they have different paradigms, different research objectives, different methodologies, and different forms of presentation methods, even though many members of both groups sometimes do interdisciplinary work. On the whole, however, Chinese work on postmodern philosophy was mainly carried out by scholars from different fields. Scholars of Confucian philosophy from time to time dabbled in the study of postmodern philosophy, but they were anything but specialists in it, while scholars of postmodern philosophy, coming from the discipline of foreign philosophy, were relatively limited in terms of their knowledge of Chinese philosophy, so in fact there was little academic overlap between them. In fact, the disciplinary distance between them has been an obstacle for the development and in-depth discussion of postmodern Confucianism and its attendant concepts.

This reclaiming of the notion of postmodern Confucianism in order to encourage its advancement in the second decade of the 21st century marks the resumption of an important discussion that was suspended two decades ago. The end of the 20th century had largely witnessed the maturation of postmodern philosophy in the West, and relatively few significant theoretical breakthroughs or innovative avenues of exploration occurred in terms of postmodern philosophy itself, although there were certainly some influential postmodern thinkers and distinctive post-modern works that appeared during that period. Since then, Chinese scholars have made significant efforts to engage with the views of its main representatives, to study the thinkers themselves with their postmodern perspectives, and use their results to examine many practical problems in the post-modern era (such as the modern crisis of identity, etc.). In many contexts, in fact, postmodern philosophy has encountered challenges and problems brought about by its own deconstructive methods (see Wang, 2018). While many postmodern philosophers have tried to overcome these problems in various ways, Chinese scholars have been occupied with importing, introducing, and reinterpreting the constructive postmodernism of American philosophers and theologians (see Griffin, 1988). Interestingly, Confucian postmodernism has emerged as an additional resource for overcoming the problems with postmodern philosophy. The reason is plain and simple: Confucian philosophy is distinctively constructivist, it is complementary with postmodern philosophy, and it is eminently able produce innovative postmodern theories and methods.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, work on traditional Chinese Confucianism has continued apace, and Chinese scholars have occupied themselves with developing and expounding its contemporary value for present society as well as continuing its academic dialogue with contemporary Western philosophy, including postmodern philosophy. Over the past twenty years, Chinese scholars have witnessed the emergence of a great many scholars familiar with both Chinese and Western philosophy, proficient in foreign languages, and equipped with

interdisciplinary perspective. This has supplied a cadre of qualified specialists in the study of postmodern Confucianism, in addition to a large number of influential experts in comparative philosophy in foreign academic circles. Although they are not primarily engaged in the study of the relationship between Confucianism and postmodern philosophy, their train of thought, methods and achievements in comparative research inspire work on postmodern Confucianism.

Of particular interest to note here is with the background of contemporary information technology and artificial intelligence, contemporary Western humanistic scholars put forward the concept of the “posthuman” (see Wolfe, 2010, pp. xi-xvii). At the “Postmodern Performance” conference held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1976, the famous Egyptian-American literary theorist Ihab Hassan (1977) presented his paper, “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?”, which was written in the form of a medieval disputation. In this paper, Hassan proposed that the humanism of the previous five hundred years might have come to an end (p. 843). Although the word “posthuman” is very ambiguous, its basic spirit signifies no more than the obsolescence of human beings or the obsolescence of the humanistic spirit. The former is directed to the human situation brought about by modern science and technology and their application, while the latter is related to the great challenges faced by traditional humanistic theories. Accordingly, Western scholars has witnessed the emergence of a posthumanism that intensively discusses these and other closely related issues. The current paper is not intended as a contribution to post humanism, and here I just want to emphasize that the issues raised and discussed by posthumanism probably require the participation of both postmodernism as a kind of Western humanism and traditional Chinese Confucianism as a key representative of Eastern humanism. Postmodern Confucianism should be an important component of post-humanism, because it provides an important approach to the understanding of posthumanism, and it should take its proper place in reconstructing the inherent deconstruction of postmodern philosophy.

The myriad issues surrounding postmodern Confucianism ought to be the topic of special debate and discussion by professionals in the field of postmodern philosophy and Chinese philosophy. Against the background presented above, I want to emphasize the following points regarding postmodern Confucianism:

The first point is that postmodern Confucianism is a style of narrative philosophy that can be situated in proximity to analytic philosophy, and following two sets of text can assist in demonstrating its this narrative aspect. The first concerns filial piety and is from the “Wei Zheng” chapter of the *Analects*:

Meng Yi asked about filial piety. The Master replied, “It is not being disobedient.” The Master mentioned it to Fan Chi as the latter drove him, “Mengsun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him, ‘not being disobedient’.” Fan Chi asked, “What did you mean?” The Master explained, “That parents, when alive, be served in line with propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried in line with propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to in line with propriety.”

Meng Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “The only thing parents are concerned with is their children’s health.”

Zi You asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “Nowadays filial piety is thought to mean the feeding of one’s parents. Both dogs and horses are fed—but without reverence, what is there to distinguish the feeding of parents from the raising of animals?”

Zi Xia asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “The difficulty is with the countenance. If, when their elders have any troublesome affairs, the young take the toil of them, and if, when the young have wine and food, they set them before their elders, is this to be considered filial piety?”¹

The second set of texts is a conversation also about filial piety between Euthyphro and Socrates in Plato’s works. Euthyphro met Socrates when he went to court to accuse his father of murder. Euthyphro told Socrates what had happened: A servant killed one of Euthyphro’s

household slaves in drunken anger, so Euthyphro's father bound the servant hand and foot and threw him in a ditch, then sent a man to inquire from the priest what should be done. During that period Euthyphro's father gave no thought or care to the bound man. Hunger and cold and the servant's bonds caused his death before the messenger came back from the seer. Euthyphro believed that his father should be punished by the law. But when Euthyphro decided to prosecute his father, his father and other relatives were angry, for they believed it was impious for a son to prosecute his father as a murder.

Then, a conversation about filial piety took place between Socrates and Euthyphro. The train of thought in the dialogue between Socrates and Euthyphro can be simply summarized up as follows:²

When Euthyphro claimed that he had knowledge of piety, Socrates asked, "What is piety?," and sets up three requirements to be met: (1) There must be some feature that is the same in every pious action; (2) this feature will not be shared by any impious action; and (3) it will be that feature (or the lack of it) that makes an action pious (or impious).

Euthyphro gave his first definition as "the pious is what I am now doing." Socrates explained that Euthyphro's first answer was not an answer to the question because it failed to meet the first condition above. Euthyphro then gave his second answer to the question, that is, what is pleasing to the gods is pious, and Socrates explained why Euthyphro's second answer leads to self-contradiction, since it does not meet the second condition above. Socrates continues to guide Euthyphro to his third definition: what the gods all love is pious. Socrates analyzed the problem with Euthyphro's third answer, which failed to meet the third condition above, namely, the pious is loved by the gods for the reason that it is pious, but it is not pious because it is loved by the gods (see Plato, 1997).

These two sets of text express distinctive positions and different styles. In the case of Euthyphro, the texts highlight an analytical method of philosophical inquiry, and the dialogue is intended to let the reader seek the objective, common and permanent nature of and basis for filial piety by following Socrates (or more accurately, Plato), or in a word, the filial piety as understood in the sense of traditional metaphysics. This is obviously a method of inquiry that had influenced the development of traditional Western philosophy for more than 2000 years before Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Comte, and it is also functions on the level of binary opposition, fundamentalism, and essentialism that postmodern philosophy explicitly opposes.

In comparison, the discussions about filial piety between Confucius and his disciples in the *Analects of Confucius* do not approach filial piety as transcendental or substantive, and they are intended for the understanding of filial piety through the constant experience and adjustment of relationships with parents in a variety of circumstances, from various perspectives, and in different life situations. In this sense, people cannot give filial piety an accepted standard definition as is done in the natural sciences, because people of different ages and genders and in different situations have different understandings of it. Such understandings have obvious relativity, which reflects the characteristics of perspectivism that is a central feature of postmodern philosophy.

It has explicitly been recognized by the contemporary international community engaging in the study of Confucianism that postmodern Confucianism is a kind of narrative philosophy. The American scholar Roger Ames argues that Confucianism is to a great extent biographical and genealogical, and that it builds on narratives based on formative models, the continuing narratives of a community, and the ongoing processes of thought and life style, rather than on detached theories and structures of belief. Traditional Chinese Confucianism is very different from the way in which Western "philosophers" do "philosophy"; for these reasons, it is better to approach Confucianism with a narrative rather than an analytical understanding, which is to say that Confucianism ought not to be essentialized into a special kind of ideology or technological philosophy (see Ames, 2007).³

The notion that postmodern Confucianism is a kind of narrative philosophy coincides with the thinking of postmodern philosophers as if by prior agreement. In early July 2004, Richard Rorty (2004), a philosopher who admitted to having been influenced by “postmodern relativism” (p. 3) since the 1980s, was regarded as in some case already as a Confucian (see Allinson, 2009, p. 129), was invited to give a lecture at Beijing Normal University in China, entitled “Analytic Philosophy and Narrative Philosophy” (see Rorty, 2007; Herausgegeben, 2005, p. 69; see also Moller, 2009, pp. 181–182). In fact, his ideas at that time were a re-articulation of many relevant points from his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. As a postmodern philosopher in favor of narrative philosophy, Rorty expressed his enthusiasm for the idea of postmodern Confucianism.

The second point, closely related to the first, is that postmodern Confucianism understands itself as a philosophy of edification. Rorty’s chapter-long discussion of edifying philosophy in the *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* provides much detail on this. Rorty (1979) regards the three most influential thinkers of postmodern philosophy, namely Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, as typical representatives of edifying philosophy (see Rorty, 1979, pp. 11–12, 368), which strongly differs from analytic philosophy (also known as systematic philosophy). Analytic philosophy focuses on cognitive constructions of human thought, and it attempts to provide a “universal commensuration” for people’s lives through the construction of academic systems. In contrast, edifying philosophy is “skeptical primarily about systematic philosophy, about the whole project of universal commensuration” (Rorty, 1979, p. 368). In Rorty’s view, edifying philosophy does not seek for objective truth or epistemological commensuration, but aims at obtaining solidarity without inevitability by means of narrative, and “at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth” (Rorty, 1979, p. 373).

The traditional Chinese Confucian view of edification provides another direct academic resource for postmodern Confucianism. In the light of the work of contemporary scholars in Chinese philosophy, it is worth looking at the programmatic proposition of edification in the “Jin Xin II” chapter of the *Mencius*. Examining the premise and foundation of edification, the text holds that “A man who commands our liking is what is called a good man,”⁴ emphasizing that the authentic goodness in human nature is rooted in Heaven and is inherent to human beings. This is to say that such virtues and qualities as benevolence, righteousness, appropriateness, and wisdom are the most important defining factors of human beings because they are inherent. Mencius continues and says:

“He whose goodness is part of himself is what is called a real man. He whose goodness has been filled up is what is called a beautiful man. He whose completed goodness is brightly displayed is what is called a great man. When this great man exercises a transforming influence, he is what is called a sage. When the sage is beyond our knowledge, he is what is called a spirit-man.”⁵

Based on these and similar ideas, the traditional Confucian view of edification holds that on the one hand, the edification of human beings is a process of returning to the heart and discovering conscience; on the other hand, it promotes the transformation of human’s inner spirit and physical existence through their practical activities, so as to achieve the improvement of emotion and temperament and to cultivate a healthy ideal personality. This process specifically involves the study of Confucian classics, the full understanding of the edifying role of Confucian philosophical classics, the cultivation of inclusive ritual and musical culture, and the emphasis on family education.

The 20th century emergence of postmodern philosophy has had a great influence on the Chinese intellectual community and life world. This philosophy has deep resonances with traditional Chinese Confucian philosophy and culture. The initial dialogues between postmodernism and Confucianism as well as the fledgling efforts to bring them together in the end of last century did not last long, nor did they break deep ground. It is really a great pity. Twenty years later, we are once again advancing the concept of postmodern Confucianism, and tentatively bringing forward the two main features of it, narrative and edification. This is not only a tentative proposal for our current thinking, but also the basis for our future research. We are looking

forward to more scholars to take a hand in postmodern philosophy and Confucian philosophy both at home and abroad and to participate in the discussion and debate to jointly begin to construct the project of postmodern Confucianism that was left unfinished. We believe that this work represents a beneficial attempt at the postmodern philosophy in itself, which is gradually losing its influence, and Confucian philosophy, which should exert greater cultural influence in the era of globalization.

Notes

1. See <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng/ens>.
2. Here I would like to express my special thanks to Dr. Bo Mou, the professor in the Department of Philosophy at San Jose State University. Years ago, I attended Professor Bo Mou's academic lecture at Beijing. At the lecture he offered this train of thought, and quoted the texts that I use in this paper. In the email letters afterwards, Professor Bo Mou recommended treatises on related views. Here I borrowed Professor Bo Mou's train of thought and his summary of related texts. Of course, Professor Bo Mou used these texts to discuss the issue of comparison between Western and Eastern morality, while I here employ Professor Bo Mou's interpretation of his materials to show the important difference between Chinese Confucian philosophy and traditional Western philosophy in terms of narrative and analysis.
3. With the permit mail from Professor Richard Rorty, the Chinese version of his manuscript was used as the preface of the collection *A True American Philosophy* (pp. 1–10). China Social Sciences Press. (《一位真正的美国哲学家》, 王成兵编, 北京: 中国社会科学出版社).
4. See <http://nothingistic.org/library/mencius/mencius55.html>.
5. Ibid.

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