

China Turns to Confucianism to Sustain Nation's Rise

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Abstract. To avoid the anxiety that arises when human beings are reminded of their own mortality, they embrace death defying cultural worldviews and values with the belief that a portion of them will survive eternally. Culture shares the same defensive psychological function as well, since it can provide meaning and value and bestows psychological equanimity in the face of death. Culture is also meant to maintain the attachment for human beings to give them a place where they belong and where can be supported. What will happen to if the culture changes so rapidly and humans even cannot adapt to it? Because of the May 4th movement in 1919 and Cultural Revolution in 1966 – 1976, Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism is virtually extinct in the 20th century. Instead, people fanatically develop economy and pursue Western values with the principle of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy and CCP newly designed development principles. People feel they are disoriented as they lose their balance and Chinese identity, a whole range of problems appear. Therefore, the Chinese now decide to revive Confucianism and traditional culture to go back to the bedrock of their civilization and rediscover their own soul to attain a meaningful and better life.

Keywords: terror management theory, Confucianism, traditional Culture, revival.

1. Introduction

There are two important issues that will be explored in this paper. The first issue is terror management theory, and the correlation between TMT theory and China's revival of Confucianism. The second issue is why China now revives Confucianism and traditional culture, and what China will be in the future. This paper applies the terror management theory to illustrate the upsurge of nationalism and a renaissance of traditional Chinese culture. According to TMT, when people are reminded of their mortality, they would be motivated to validate and defend their cultural worldviews and values in order to boost their self-esteem and viability of their own culture.

2. Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT) suggests that culture serves as an essential psychological defense against the terror that is inherent in human existence (Becker, 1971; Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). Culture offers insights into people's psychological and behavioral reactions to the realization of their inevitable mortality. TMT theorists and researchers (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003) inspired by Becker (1971, 1973, 1975) assert that "cultural worldviews that give life meaning and permanence, give us the opportunity to view ourselves as valuable beings, and provide some hope of transcending death". Because of the unique human capacity of meaning-making and social construction, death has evolved into a very complex and dynamic system, involving biological, psychological, spiritual, societal and cultural components (Kastenbaum, 2000). Culture in particular provides protection against most basic human fears, and provides meaning and value to human life. It can also be seen as an anxiety buffer against the existential terror intrinsic to anxiety-prone human beings. The cultural anxiety buffer consists of worldviews and values that provide self-esteem and a meaningful life.

3. Background

Since the Opening Policy in 1978, China underwent radical and tremendous changes. Chinese people feverishly devoted themselves to developing the economy and technology in the past two decades, under the delusion that materialism alone is the path to human happiness. But the most conscientious efforts for prosperity and happiness have produced just the opposite result: the rampant economic growth at the cost of

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people's morality and humanity. The poor and weak in society long for equal rights, justice, and compassion. On the other hand, some rich people in society become wealthy by improper or illegal means, and their values are twisted. These problems are threatening the survival of the Chinese, actually going against or deviating from the Chinese ideal – the world are One (*shi jie da tong* 世界大同). Confucianism can solve the problems such as the value of life, the meaning of being, the improvement of personality and reaching moral perfection (Jiang 1995). China is returning back to its home base, the Confucius worldview and traditional cultural value, and rediscovering its own soul and searching meaning for people's lives.

4. Confucianism Reemerges after Long Oppression

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese culture was often dwarfed by political movements and economic development. The 20th century has seen a decline in Confucian morality in Mainland China due to the denigration of Chinese traditional culture and thoughts. "Down with the Confucian school" (*da dao kong jia dian* 打到孔家店) was one of the slogans of the all-powerful May 4 Movement in 1919 in which Chinese intellectuals embraced Western science and democracy and considered China's Confucian heritage as an obstacle to its modernization and quest for power and wealth in competition with the nations of the world (Chen, 2011). During the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976, revolutionary leader Chairman Mao Zedong kicked off a campaign to "criticize Lin Biao and Confucius", Confucianism, among various schools of thoughts, was most fiercely attacked and condemned as it is a troublesome burden of China on her way toward economic prosperity and science and technology development. Since then, Confucianism in Mainland China had become virtually extinct in the late 20th century.

The ideological emancipation of the last 1970s, advocated by Deng Xiaoping, significantly changed the mind-set of China's more than a billion citizens, unveiling a new era of creativity and productivity (Hu 2011), yet it had also plunged Chinese society into political puzzlement and a moral vacuum. It is now high time to ponder where China is morally and politically heading (Fan, 2011). Thereinafter, China's Communist Party chiefs made a decision on cultural reforms in Oct. 2011 as the world's second largest economy seeks to maintain its cultural tradition during the era globalization. The goal of the cultural reform is to build up China citizen's confidence and consolidate its people's soul. People in the nation finally realize that culture is the source of national stability, unity, and prosperity; an element of national competitiveness and sense of belonging; and a pillar for country's economic, social, and spiritual development. Every Chinese should look into himself with a dagger of conscience and a bite the soul-searching bullet.

Neo-Confucian scholars in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States, reacting to mainstream scholarship and dominate ideologies, have attempted to carry the burden of preserving and reviving the endangered Chinese tradition (Jiang, 2011). More and more scholars publicize "country-cultural learning" (*guo xue* 国学) and practice Confucianism as a "reservation zone" for the revival of family and morality (Littlejohn, 2011). Professors who give lectures on traditional culture including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism at national television channels become well-known scholars overnight. *Di Zi Gui*, *San Zi Jing*, *Confucius Analects* become mandatory reading materials in Chinese literature courses. Classical recital classes (*guo xue ban* 国学班) for children spring up quickly in many parts of the State. Thousands of books and DVDs on Confucianism and traditional culture and philosophy are sold out soon in bookstores and supermarkets. Confucian businessmen (*ru shang* 儒商) and benevolent officials are highly praised by the public. More and more people refer to the Chinese sages such as Confucius, Mencius, Zhuang Zi, and Xun Zi to acquire wisdom. The ancient teachings of Confucius, centering on virtue and harmony, are finding a new resonance amid the chaotic and rapid development of modern China.

5. Why China Revives Confucianism

Chinese people are seeking their traditional cultural worldviews and resurrecting the ontological standards and values that embedded in their bones. How to understand this motive? TMT offers a clear explanation. Modern Western values of liberty, rationality, due process of law, human rights and dignity, independence and autonomy of the individual, while overwhelming, was never compelling enough to attract the faith required to establish an adequate cultural anxiety buffer in the Chinese (Salzman, 2008). Western values, liberty without discipline, rationality without sympathy, legality without humanity, rights without responsibility, and individual dignity without social solidarity, autonomy without virtue cannot bring about an enduring social order and peace in China. Those Western values ignore the fundamental cultural and

religious differences between China and the West. While maladaptive anxiety reduction strategies may have momentary desired effects, they serve to produce additional sources of grief, pain, and tragedy (Department of Education, 1993). Accompanying free market and reform and opening-up policy, the long-honored Chinese values, such as refining personal morality and cherishing peace and harmony are gone with the material pursuit. The Chinese lost their way finding their spiritual home. The famous Confucian scholar Jiang Qing argues that the right and effective way for Chinese to tackle such problems is to cultivate and regain the lost standards of public conduct to nurture something deep in people's hearts. Confucianism, which focuses on the cultivation of virtue and maintenance of ethics, has long embodied the ideals of Chinese (2005). It is in this sense that all five-core Confucian values, with the right emphasis on humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trust can help China develop a sense of responsibility for man's proper relationship to himself, his community, the state, the nature, and the world.

From a TMT perspective, efforts toward cultural recovery and a reconstruction of a world of meaning in which to act represent an important step toward the restoration of the essential psychological prerequisites for adaptive action. Chinese people are seeking to identify and operationalize bedrock principles and values that define their being and guide their action (Salzman, 2008). Yet in this modern era, neither all things associated with feudal times should be abandoned nor all Confucian worldviews are perfect. Some of his ideas are outdated, such as the three obediences: to father before marriage, to husband after marriage and to son after the death of one's husband, the power-based doctrine, the order of a rank society by indicating the divine right of emperors, and social values that require people to be docile. Chinese people should absorb the essence and cast away the bad values to adapt them to current situation.

According to Hood et al.'s (2005) logotherapy "the striving to find meaning in life is the primary motivational force in man". He saw that humans are "able to live and die for the sake of his ideals and values". Humankind is metaphysical beings searching for an ultimate meaning of life. The Chinese realize that they must first rebuild their cultural identity before they can make themselves more respected in the world and united in case of a crisis. The traditional culture will provide an enormous impetus to the national rejuvenation in front of the rising tide of cultural globalization. Solomon et al. (2004) suggested that there might be circumstances under which individuals cannot maintain the cultural anxiety buffer either because they cannot maintain a sense of value within the cultural drama, or because they can no longer sustain faith in the cultural drama itself. One possibility for such people is to find an alternative cultural worldview that is more compelling that better enables them to obtain self-esteem. Chinese civilization has endured for five thousands of years is largely because of the moral system established by ancient sages that regulate how people behave and interact with others. If Chinese people want to strive for their nation, they must base their values on a sense of national identity and confidence with their culture, which touch and warm people's hearts.

According to the terror management theory, the striving process of recovering and reconstructing Confucianism and traditional culture is a psychological renewal, a revalidation of Chinese people's world view and their standards for being and living in the world. The essential function of culture reconstructs a world of meaning for people to act in and achieve anxiety-buffering self-esteem, through the meeting of standards defined by its culture.

6. Culture Recovery and Reconstruction of Confucianism

In China, culture has always been compared to water, which is gentle and benevolent; it is also like soft rain drizzling at night, quietly nurturing everything from human souls to society. Cultural worldviews imbue the universe with meaning, order, predictability, and permanence. Humans are meaning seeking and meaning constructing organisms (Frankl, 1984; Yalom, 1980). Essential self-esteem can only be derived from action in a meaningful world (Becker, 1971, 1973). So, what is a Chinese meaningful world? What are the core values of Chinese culture?

In the long history of Chinese civilization, "virtue" has always been highly valued, which involves both personal morality and social morality. This worldview offers prescriptions and standards that indicate what people should do and be to achieve a sense of value in this shared conception of reality (Salzman, 2001). Confucius also remarked that: "If you wish to have a place for yourself you have to give a place to others; if you wish to succeed yourself, you have to help others to succeed." Confucius makes the virtues of filial piety and fraternal love the cornerstones of his doctrine (Zhang, 1999). Filial piety is the root of virtue, that from which education comes to life.

“Education” is another highlighted value in Confucianism. Confucius sets up the standards of self-cultivation “stick to the way to your goal, base yourself on virtue, lean upon benevolence, and take your recreation in the six arts (i.e. music, the rites, archery, carriage driving, classic books and arithmetic) (Quotations from Confucius). Nowadays, the six arts should mean to educate and develop human potentials and skills holistically and integratively.

“Affections”, refers to warmth and fondness to the family members, one’s lover, friends, colleges, fellow townsmen. In *Great Learning*, it stipulates: “it is rare to find one who loves and yet still knows another’s flaws, or hates and yet still knows another’s good points” (Shaughnessy, 2010). The Chinese attach extreme importance to “the debt of gratitude” they owe to others and always hope to recompense it. Confucius once argued: “All men under Heaven are brothers”, which shows the Chinese ideal world – a world in unity with compassion. This may be the reason why the basic tenets of Marxism and Communism with adaptation to Chinese circumstances can be rooted for so many years in China.

“Harmony” is the most valuable principle now in China. The seeking of human hearts harmony, social harmony, ethnic group harmony, political harmony, national harmony, and the world harmony is taken into national agenda. This philosophy is totally different from the western struggle philosophy of “competition for existence, survival of the fittest” and the Law of the Jungle that “the weak are the prey of the strong”, yet it depicts an ideal relationship among human and nature, and human beings themselves.

“Benevolence” is the core of Confucianism. Gravity, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence, and generosity are the five qualities for a benevolent man. The most fundamental concern of Confucianism should be to teach individuals to cultivate benevolence and to perfect their personality through self-effort and self-reflection (Mou, 1990).

In light of the terror management theory, there are two basic components of the cultural anxiety-buffer: a) faith in a meaningful conception of reality that provides the possibility of death transcendence to those who meets the prescribed standards of value (*the cultural worldview*); and, b) the belief that one is meeting those standards of value (*self-esteem*). People are motivated to maintain faith in their cultural worldviews and satisfy the standards of value associated with their worldviews (Solomon, Greenberg, Schimel, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2004). The aforementioned Confucius values offer Chinese people meaning and confidence, and endow its people with significance and equanimity.

7. Discussion

Whenever the United States is mentioned, Hollywood movies and Coca Cola come into mind. It is cartoon and sushi that make people be reminded of Japan. France is always associated with wine and perfume. What is the cultural identity of China? Kungfu? Peking Opera? Great Wall? Dumplings? Or Confucianism? While Chinese people spent many years creating booming economy, technology, and military influence, they spent little time becoming a cultural world entity. The main risk to China’s future growth lies in the disharmony between economic and social development. Economic growth has resulted in many social problems and social contradictions that have yet to be solved. (Hu 2011). The Chinese are paying overwhelming attention to economic capital, scientific development and material abundance. However, they fail to preserve and carry on its great culture and civilization. The challenge for China now is to fuse its traditional culture with current social and economic development. And the Chinese, from the top officials to the common people should put more efforts in cultivating justice, humanity, morality and social harmony in everybody’s heart. TMT theorists and researchers suggest that a cultural construction serves the essential function of buffering anxiety-prone humans against the potentially paralyzing terror that may result from an unmediated awareness of morality (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). We can work, in our communities, nations and world to construct and provide positive pathways to significance and to a “constructive heroism” because people strive for significance whether through altruism, providing for one’s family, contributing to a better global future (Salzman, 2008).

This year marks the 2563th anniversary of Confucius’ birthday. While alive, the sage was not accepted by his society. His beliefs were met with the curse of ridicule and prejudice and his life was crippled with harsh conditions and setback. In 21st century, a new age of Confucian Renaissance is now dawning as research institutes and colleges flourish all over the world. The quest of humanity will advance into new frontiers at the speed of light, and society will continue in its rollercoaster journey with its new discoveries of the past (Ma, 2010). Nevertheless, the revival of Confucianism requires a long-term process. Traditional Confucianism needs a space where it can grow slowly and thrive (Lin, 2011).

8. Conclusion

This paper presents an existential analysis of China's revival of Confucianism and the effects of cultural recovery. In terms of the essential psychological functions of Terror Management Theory, the motive for Chinese people to recover, reconstruct and adapt to Confucianism and traditional cultures can be well understood in the context of the essential anxiety-buffering function offered by culture. Cultural worldviews and people's identity and self-esteem serve as a psychological defense against the anxiety and terror inherent in human world.

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