

A Historical Perspective of the Social Status of China's Intellectuals

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Abstract. This paper aims to probe the social status of China's intellectuals throughout the whole Chinese history from a historical perspective. Intellectuals have constituted a significant part in the stratified society of China. The role of intellectuals in China's society has always been changing. The changes, consequently, have affected the social status of this elite group. From a historical perspective, the paper mainly analyzes how the social status of intellectuals is influenced by China's social and political paramount events. The interactions and correlations between and society and the power of intellectuals can be objectively and completely perceived.

Keywords: Historical Perspective, China's Intellectuals, Social Status, Confucianism.

1. Introduction

Each state or nation in the world has its own particular history. Throughout different historical processes, each state has established its unique political and economic system as well as its particular cultural ideology. However, one similarity among various historical development processes of different states is that people are the greatest contributors to their own nations. Intellectuals, as a special and important social class which is different from peasants and workers, consequently deserve a reasonable acknowledgement by society.

China, as a nation with over 5000 years of history, has been experiencing profound and complex social evolution. China, as a state, also has lived through various social systems, from primary state, feudalistic imperialism, semi-feudalism and semi-colonized society, to a socialist society today. Chinese intellectuals, as a crucial social class, have been predominantly involved in the long historical evolution. More importantly, as an essential group of participants, how have they interplayed with the development of the state and establish their identity as well as status in a different social regime? This paper just aims to tentatively explore the relations between intellectuals and state in China from a historical perspective. It especially focuses on the complicated Chinese historical processes through the interplay of intellectuals and state politics.

2. Confucian Literati and Ancient China

2.1. Origin of China's Intellectuals

Confucius, the latinized name of Chinese K'ung Fu-tzu, or 'Master K'ung' (Horowitz, 1963: p517), lived in the period of warring feudal principalities. He reveled in all kinds of studies and knowledge, especially education and politics, and devoted all his life to compiling and preaching his doctrines. His educational tenets profoundly influenced his disciples who later successively passed them down to more other disciples. His tenets range from learning methods, study attitude, to political tactics of state governance. Many disciples and literati accepted his ideas and gradually further developed them into a dominating school of thought, which is called Confucianism nowadays. Generally, Confucianism refers to a major school of thought in China which defends an ethical and political ideal that has become a dominant influence on the way of life of Chinese.

People may wonder why only Confucianism has become the mainstream school of thought at the expenses of others. Further analysis on Confucianism will reveal the inevitability of its domination in Chinese ideology. The central doctrine of Confucianism is 'Ren', which means goodness, benevolence, humanity, and kind-heartedness. It tells people to love others and to be good to others. It tells the emperors to govern the state with humanity. One of Confucius' important works is 'Zhong Yong', which means moderate

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desire. He comprehensively illustrated what moderate desire means for different people. He advocated propriety and reciprocity between emperor and ministers, emperor and the masses as well as respect and consideration between people. Generally he persuaded people to be mediocre and appropriate, but not too radical in their action. Just this kind of ‘moderate desire’, which had been predominantly planted in people’s cognitive views of the world, formed a special relation between the ancient literati and the state. According to Weber, the ‘moderate desire’ can be called a morality of harmony which means natural and emphasizes adjustment and conformity to social rules (Murvar, 1985: p149).

2.2. Maintaining The Harmony of Social Order

Influenced by the doctrine of moderate desire, Confucian literati were inherently lacking in rebelling spirit. This echoes Weber’s analysis that ‘Confucianism provided no such leverage point to change the world. Its aim was not change at all, but to maintain a traditional order (Murvar, 1985: P122).’ Weber also noted that Confucianism was conservative, looking backward to an ideal society of the past. Its highest aim was to uphold the familistic structure of society. Therefore, for those literati, everything was born in an order by nature. They did not take the responsibility to change it. On the contrary, maintenance of the original order could be regarded as the prime contribution. Thus this essence of Confucianism greatly contributes to the long governance of feudalistic imperialism in China for more than 2000 years. Confucianism recognized the form of familistic descent as a rooted order by nature. Literati as well as many average people never questioned those privileges of the royal family. Thus, the reign of one dynasty could stay stable for a long period.

2.3. Facilitating the Imperial State Order

The first two chapters of Confucius’ famous work, ‘Lun Yu’ (records of Confucius’ philosophic sentences), are respectively entitled ‘Wei Xue Di Yi’ (study first), and ‘Wei Zhe Di Er’ (politics second). There are two implications about the relations between study and politics for literati. Firstly, it tells literati to take academic study as the first priority and to pursue self-perfection and self-development. Secondly, it puts study prior to politics to emphasize its importance. On the other hand, it implies that study is a necessary precursor to a politician. Confucianism does not oppose the involvement of literati in politics. Members of Confucian school are motivated by social and political concerns, and many take part in government at some stage of their careers, with some attaining influential official positions. Weber’s analysis, ‘Literary education was the yardstick of the social prestige and the basic qualification for office’, also proves the implications (Bendix, 1966: p116).

Furthermore, state emperors, of course, welcomed literati the involvement of literati in office affairs, if the harmony preached by them could prevent the disturbance caused by the restless spirits of nature and man. In addition, Confucian literati also quite positively commented on emperors’ good deeds or implicitly drew attention to emperors’ wrong deeds. Therefore, those emperors gradually accepted Confucian notions and applied them into state policy. Confucianism reached its peak in Han Dynasty. Many literati were recruited to serve in office. They became ‘Confucian officers’ or ‘gentleman-officials’, who ascended from persuaders or advisors to practical participants or even policy planners. This unity of Confucianism and state (Bendix, 1966:p104) is reciprocal to both the tenet of harmony of the literati and the solidity of the imperial power of the state. This unity itself was a manifestation of Confucius’ doctrine of harmony.

However, both sides, the Confucian literati and the emperors, tacitly accepted an order of rank. From another doctrine of ‘Jun GUI, Cheng Qing’, which means regality is paramount, ministers and officials are humble and subordinated, it can be obviously seen that Confucian literati preached the respect and loyalty to monarchy as a necessary merit. Therefore, it is destined that the role of Confucian officers was just to facilitate the emperors’ governance of the state.

2.4. Three Anti-Confucianism Movements

The development of Confucianism did not always follow a smooth path. It also had to contend with what was called ‘anti-Confucianism’ in certain historical period. Anti-Confucianism refers to a social movement in which its dominating status in ideology was harshly criticized or even prosecuted by other schools or state authority.

According to history record, there were three major anti-Confucianism movements. The first one occurred during the Q'in dynasty. The first emperor of the first unified state, Q'in Shi Huang, deployed 'Fen Shu Kong Ru' movement (to burn the Confucianism books, and bury the Confucian literati) in 212 B. C. A Second anti-Confucianism tide came in the semi-feudalistic and semi-colonized period. A group of new literati, who experienced western education or accepted western ideas of science and democracy, advocated the using new language, which was simple and easy for everyone, instead of the classical language, which was abstruse and could only be comprehended by Confucian literati. The third movement against Confucianism occurred in RCR which aimed at the thought reform of people in China. Confucianism, as a representation of feudalistic ideology, faced the fate of being deracinated during that period. Detailed historical facts and events are not going to be presented here, but some similarities can be found among the three movements. Furthermore, these similarities may facilitate our perception of the relationship between Confucian literati and the state as well as politics.

Firstly, three movements all came forth in an unstable or chaotic political context which involved severe struggles for the regime of the state between the new and old political power. If the new political power or regime aims to stabilize its authority, it must strengthen ideological governance over the society and people. Therefore, Confucianism is bound to be the target owing to its peaceful and harmonious combination with the former state. Secondly, why did the anti-Confucianism movements emerge repetitively, even though sometimes the prosecution against Confucianism was quite cruel and effective? The reason is that once the new states completely command the social order, Confucianism is gradually rehabilitated to facilitate their administration. For example, in the late Ch'in dynasty, Confucian literature was still widely studied and pursued by many literati and educated officials. Thirdly, during the anti-Confucianism movements, there was never any other school of thought really available to take the place of Confucianism. Therefore, Confucianism, as the soul of Chinese culture, influences every aspect and all classes in society, especially the state politics and intellectuals' idea throughout Chinese history. The real purpose of anti-Confucianism is not to exterminate Confucianism, but to cleave the connection between Confucianism and the old state, which may be an obstacle to the construction of new state order.

3. The Rise and Fall of Intellectuals in Modern China

3.1. New Intellectuals and New Culture Movement

If we assume that the over 2000-year imperialism was the golden age of China, By the start of the twentieth century, China had been in a senile state. Ch'ing dynasty, as the last imperial state, staggeringly collapsed down after struggling with social chaos. Another stimulus which accelerated the demise of Ch'ing was the expansion of western colonialism. Under the converging attack of the internal and external forces, Ch'ing experienced the unprecedented political and social upheavals. However, just this kind of turbulent social context provoked 'intellectual ferment' in China. This 'intellectual ferment' broke the domination of traditional Confucianism and stimulated reflection about the fate of the nation among intellectuals.

One of the leading figures was K'ang Y'ouwei. He was regarded as a representative of neo-Confucian or neo-traditionalist. New-traditionalists refer to those Confucian literati who made effort to explain the relationship between 'essential' traditional values and contemporary culture expression of them (Goldman and Lee, 2002: p43). He did not preach the abandonment of Confucianism. On the contrary, he endeavoured to establish a 'Confucian religion' and to protect the imperial Confucian as well as the working partnership of scholar and official. Essentially, he was a loyal defender of Confucianism.

Another outstanding character, Yan Fu, was the first intellectual who read literature of Western political economy in English and selected from it to serve the interests of his own culture. He was also the first one to call for anti-Confucianism. However, this anti-Confucianism was only intended to reform the classical language into easy language without fundamentally attacking the essence of Confucianism. Yan Fu made more contribution in the field of introducing knowledge rather than changing ideology. He himself did not participated in political debate even though he brought forward ideas about state power and individual autonomy. He was a representative of academic scholar holding westernized political notions among the intellectuals during that period.

The last one who deserves discussion is Ch'en Duxiu. He was well known as a radical and professor of humanities. In 1915, he founded a magazine, 'New Youth', which advocated science, democracy, literary revolution, and the revolt of youth and women. 'New Youth' also provided other intellectuals with a free forum to present different ideas. More importantly, 'New Youth' published the events of World War I, and Russian Revolution which awakened people as a progressive political force. In 1920, Ch'en Tu-hsiu announced his conversion to Marxism and turned the magazine into a vehicle for new Chinese Communist movement. Compared with the former two intellectuals, Ch'en Tu-hsiu was a representative of political radicalism and progressivism which were urgently needed by the society.

The three historical figures represented three kinds of Chinese intellectuals with different political orientations. The first was conservative, the second was comparatively neutral and the last was radical. Whatever political stance they may take, one commonality was that Chinese intellectuals possessed a strong sense of responsibility for the state, which could be called nationalism. Inspired by the nationalism, China's intellectuals joined the ideological struggle and pondered the value of national culture actively. On the other hand, this disintegrated political and social reality provided a chance for autonomous thinking which was unavailable under the dictatorship of imperial regime. 'The diversity and multiplicity of culture doctrines' (Goldman and Lee, 2002: p118) during this period was called 'New Culture' movement, which particularly aimed to reject the traditional culture heritage.

Influenced by expansion of western modernity, China's higher education also experienced an historical innovation. The first westernized university, Jing Shi Da Xue Tang, founded in 1898, was innovated into a modern institution of higher learning named Peking University (generally abbreviated as Peita/Beida). Peita quickly became a main battlefield for the 'New Culture' movement under the leadership of its new president, Ts'ai Yuan-P'ei, who welcomed ideas from all over the world and collected a faculty of brilliant young men of diverse backgrounds. He implemented 'Jiangrong Bingbo' policy, which indicated broad-minded and encompassing tolerance, to protect teachers and students freedom to pursue their disparate culture and political commitments (Schwarcz, 1986: p66). Therefore, students in Peita were liberated from the indoctrination of Confucianism and were able to access to various ideas, especially the western, scientific and democratic ideas. Beijing University students viewed themselves as China's 'new intellectuals'. The new intellectuals realized that they were the receivers of old thought. To change China meant, first and foremost, to change themselves and then to influence the thought of the masses. Therefore, they must transform themselves. This 'self-transformation' later became part of the 'New Culture' movement.

3.2. Intellectuals in the Era of Modern Revolution

It goes without saying that intellectuals should be the main players in every movement related to culture. Nevertheless, in RCR promoted by China's central government, intellectuals unfortunately became the victims. Consequently, they lost their significant social and political status which they had obtained in imperial times and had to surrender their autonomy which they had enjoyed in that chaotic period.

After years of formidable struggle, People's Republic of China was founded in 1949 under the great leadership of Communist and Chairman Mao. However, young China in cradle was still confronted with severe internal and external challenges. On the mainland, there were still, in some areas, hidden opponents who could emerge to attack. Internationally, as a new socialist member on the world stage, China also became an enemy of those capitalist countries, such as the US. Under this situation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted wise strategy of working with those intellectuals who transited from the old imperial state to the new China. The CCP welcomed cooperation with intellectuals and even absorbed them into government administration. One good example of this was the foundation of the Chinese Democratic and Political Consultation Committee (CDPCC) in 1949. This organization invited many outstanding scholars, celebrities and specialists who held different political belief. This measure could be regarded as a creation of the CCP. Firstly, the CCP recognized the intellectuals' value and provide them a stage to perform their talents. Secondly, CCP realized that intellectuals, who had their own thoughts, were different from workers and peasants. Their ideology could become great power to support or oppose the new regime. Therefore, by appropriately dealing with intellectual problem, they could guarantee the stable transition of new China from the old state system to socialist construction. We can use Goldman's (1981:p12) comment to sum up the

relation between intellectuals and state for this short period: 'Intellectuals in the People's Republic had earlier been used by political leaders for political purposes.'

It is well known that CCP members are all Marxism followers. They were influenced and encouraged by Russian revolution. After the founding of new China, in order to survive in the severe international environment, China still maintained a close relationship with Soviet Union and even regarded it as 'elder brother (Pepper, 2000: p159)'. New China was just like an empty page. How to grow up and to be strong as quickly as possible? The best way is just to learn from 'big brother'. Therefore, the construction of new state copied Russian Model in all aspects including education and intellectual policy. Culture revolution, which aimed to show socialist superiority to capitalism, was also learned from Soviet Union. According to the resolution saying passed by Communist Party Soviet Union in 1928 'Only with the Party and the great masses of workers and peasants mobilized to the greatest extent will be possible to solve the task of technologically and economically catching up with and overtaking the capitalist countries. It can be clearly seen that this culture revolution is purely a struggle of political classes, because only workers and peasants, but not intellectuals, are regarded as the main forces which can strengthen the development of a socialist society.

Another major contributor to the tragedy of China's intellectuals was the leadership of Mao, Chairman of PRC. There is no denying that the prominent leadership of Mao created new life for the Chinese masses. Mao's charisma, namely his personal extraordinary quality, was respected or even worshiped by the masses. According to Weber's theory, Maoism, the thought of Mao, falls into a category of 'charismatic leadership', which is associated with a radical movement of the masses and has the effect of arousing responses of the people to the heroism of the great leader. Also, the charismatic leader is always radical in challenging the established practice by going to 'the root of the matter' (Bendix, 1977:p300). Following this explanation, we may better understand the origin of the Red Culture Movement. .

What is the root of the matter? How did intellectuals become victims in this movement? According to Pepper (2000: p166), in Mao's period, intellectuals were not officially perceived as a separate social class, but most often regarded somewhere within bourgeoisie with political view. Mao also declared in 1962 that 'In order to overthrow any political power, one must first create public opinion and engage in ideological and philosophical work' (Goldman, 1981: p6). This statement implies the relation between ideology and politics. The bourgeoisie ideology of China's intellectuals was not in accordance with the politics of Chinese socialism, and intellectuals should be transformed ideologically. Therefore 'bourgeoisie ideology' of intellectuals became the object of this revolution. Furthermore, the founding of China grew from years of practical field struggles in Chinese countryside. As Weber stated, knowledge of the world and society for Mao is derived from practice (Murvar, 1985: p154). Mao strongly believed that formation of certain concept or theory should be based on perceptions derived from practical experience in physical and communal environment. Following Mao's thought, a series of movements which intended to reform intellectuals were carried out. Intellectuals were laid off from their positions and dispatched to a special school to reform their ideas. They had to admit their reactionism through doing tough manual work like peasants. They had to recite quotes from Maoist philosophy to brainwash their bourgeoisie ideas. In short, culture revolution became a chaotic national movement. People all indulged in following Maoism. Intellectuals as well as their ideologies became the obstacle of Mao's charismatic leadership and consequently became the target of the RCR. Many intellectuals died in this disastrous purge and their invaluable academic materials or works were destroyed. Even education and young generation were embroiled in the movement. School term was shortened and finally was dismissed. National examinations in higher education were cancelled. Teachers and students went to factories, farms and armies to learn skills. These were the methods of preventing 'intellectual domination'.

There is no doubt that RCR was not only a tragedy for intellectuals but also for China. However, this movement was inevitable due to the special national situation in China. Intellectuals absolutely lost the right to speak out, because they were not treated equally as an independent class in society. On the other hand, the movement, which targeted at intellectuals, backhandedly reflected an acknowledgement of the importance of intellectuals by Mao and his government.

4. Intellectuals and Today's China

During the years following the culture revolution, intellectuals lived in panic and kept only a minimal attachment to the state. Rehabilitated in 1973, Deng Xiaoping led an effort to reenergize science and knowledge. He set up a slogan for education 'Facing the world, facing the future, facing modernization'. He also quickly rehabilitated the positions of those intellectuals, who were prosecuted or maltreated during the RCR. In 1978, the national entrance examination was restored by government, which stood for the normality of the educational system.

Although the social order was quickly stabilized after Deng came into power, the rotten bureaucratization of government administration led to an unequal distribution in society. Bureaucratic working style and unfair nepotism blocked social development. In 1988, students from Peking University demonstrated on Tiananmen Square to call for the elimination of those corrupted phenomena in society, especially in state-owned institutions and government. On the one hand, Tiananmen students' movement inherited and reproduced the May Fourth spirit of 'nationalism', on the other hand it urged government to perfect management and accelerate the progress of reform. The introduction of 'open-door policy' widened Chinese horizons, activated economic development, and also enabled both the Chinese state and average people, especially workers and peasants, to realize the importance of education. Therefore, Deng and central government framed a new policy 'education is most fundamental for a hundred year scheme'. Besides the improvement of the internal environment for education and intellectualism, foreign advanced technology and severe international competition also speeded up the reform of government policy on education. The government policies which favor education and intellectuals may indirectly relate to the Tiananmen movement. Therefore, again we see that the intellectuals' sense of nationalism can stimulate state reform and social development at a crucial moment. The influence of intellectuals on state policy-making should not be ignored.

Moreover, there is a tendency that more and more intellectuals are promoted as official leaders because government is increasingly aware of their values. Intellectuals become more professionalized, or even policy wonks. This phenomenon resonates with the emergence of 'gentlemen officer' in ancient China. This unity between intellectuals and the state describes their interactive relationship in contemporary China.

5. Conclusions

From this comprehensive review of China's intellectuals' history, we may tentatively draw the following conclusions about the relations between China's intellectuals and the state.

Firstly, the state maintains absolute control over intellectuals' ideology to guarantee social stability, whereas intellectuals have to adjust their ideas to serve the state. Therefore, intellectual's fate is more politically oriented rather than academically oriented. The political stance is a necessary precondition for intellectuals' academic achievements. Academic autonomy, especially in social and humanism science, is politically limited.

Secondly, Confucianism and Maoism, which are two monolithic ideologies in different historical periods, continue their influences on intellectuals' today. For the leader-level intellectuals, they emphasize on ideological governance and intend to copy Mao's charismatic leadership. After Maoism, 'Deng's Theories', thought of Deng Xiaoping who is the Chairman after Mao and 'Jiang's Three Representativeness', thought of Jiang Zemin, who is the Chairman after Deng, emerged successively as the authority of state ideology. For the mass-level intellectuals, they are still inherited with the features of Confucianism which steers them keep balanced and harmonious relations with the state in the long run.

Thirdly, according to Goldman (1981: p3), for China's intellectuals, 'to criticize government is not the literati' right, as in the west, but their responsibility'. Thus, the 'May Fourth Spirit' should be treasured as an invaluable legacy, which can stimulate people's nationalism and patriotism in China's intellectuals, especially in young intellectuals. Concerning the May Fourth Movement and Tiananmen movement, we can see that even though they risked dangers, young intellectuals still bravely stood up against certain political facts which were unacceptable in their ideological perceptions. This spirit is purely ignited by young

intellectuals' sense of responsibility for the state. Consequently, the state just evolves through the radical social conflicts.

Furthermore, as international communication is becoming more and more frequent, more western ideas are flowing into China, which potentially influence intellectuals' as well as the ideological value of the state. How to settle the possible clashes between Chinese and Western ideologies is a crucial problem for the CCP. Therefore, being aware of the interactive relation between intellectuals and the state and taking favorable intellectuals' policy are wise alternatives for the state to strengthen its regime.

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7. References

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