

Lao Sze-Kwang's Discourse on Chinese Philosophy and Contemporary Popular Confucianism in China

According to Lao, anti-Confucian discourses in contemporary China do not attend to the theoretical content of Confucianism, but rather its functions in and impacts on society in certain historical situations. For example, Confucianism is discussed in the context of what happened in late Qing, when the Western invasion brought with it all kinds of cultural challenges. Lao names this *xi* 勢, the objective situation that has led to certain needs and responses. He differentiates *xi* from *li* 理, as it is a matter of success and failure in social reality, rather than a reflection of generally true or false inferences. This distinction explains the main arguments of the anti-Confucianism movement in modern China, which regards traditional Confucian culture as an obstacle to Chinese modernization; anti-Confucianism deems it historically necessary to enable modernization in a given period.¹

Lao argues that traditional Confucian culture had long lost its vigor by the late Qing era, and that it was largely destroyed and replaced during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. He admits that the closing (封閉系統) of the traditional culture might have created obstacles to the modernization process of the country in terms of its value system and way of life, yet these parts are not the whole of Confucianism. It is more sensible to investigate the rationales and effectiveness of the anti-Confucianism movement.² One of Lao's hypotheses is that there is discontent among cultural critics with regard to Chinese Communist rule, mixed with discontent about the cultural traditions in China, and that this takes the form of a confusing complex (混亂糾結). This complex involves the sense that Communist China has itself become a form of the tradition opposed by the anti-traditionalists, who aim at reform and modification. However, Lao does not elaborate on the origin of the complex, so I merely outline the situation here.

Modernization in China and its Problematics

Lao presents an organic and holistic view of culture when he discusses modernization.³ He advocates for the idea of an internal core of a tradition with cultural manifestations in outer layers, such as of ideas, social systems, governance and ways of life. The manifestations are parts of the whole and affect each other. Adopting the view of culture as an organic whole, Lao's cultural philosophy is clear in his argument that cultural process and progress are given form by the core and its activities. He does not agree with the notion of culture as simply a "complex of facts." However, the negative sides of his understanding are also very clear, in that culture can grow into forms of inertia, insularity and reclusiveness. The core of a culture—Chinese culture, for instance—also appropriates and incorporates other cultures when they enter its "territory." Lao's summary of the critiques of Chinese culture is also notable. He classifies these into two groups: those that assert that traditional Chinese culture is an

¹ See Chapter 4, *ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

obstacle to modernization, and those that assume modernization can be developed and generated from the cultural core of Confucianism. Lao names Neo-Confucianism as a representative of the latter group.⁴

Lao's critique of Neo-Confucianism is that modernization is actually ascribed to and learned (模擬) from Western cultures, while the foundation of modernization is generated from the cores of Western culture. It cannot simply be generated (創生) from the Chinese tradition itself. He suggests that China tried Western systems, then incorporated them via a process of cultural adaptation and appropriation until a social equilibrium was reached. He does not agree with anti-tradition, arguing that it leads nowhere and instead creates complications and unrest.⁵

Chinese Philosophy and Philosophy in China

Lao's suggestion that there is a difference between Chinese philosophy and philosophies in China is consistent with his understanding of culture as an organic core and its generations. Chinese philosophy has a core meaning structure, and its cultural counterparts, namely values and ways of life, develop from this core. This is different from philosophical pursuits conducted in China, which may cover various forms of enquiry and result in a range of thoughts.⁶ The meaning structure of Confucianism as the core of Chinese culture gives form to its central tenets through political structure, social systems and economics throughout the living history of China. When the culture met foreign influences and challenges in modern history, its core values remained, together with its philosophical sensibilities. However, it had to go through the process of incorporating the imported influences before appropriation, evaluating the foreign influences to see if they could be acculturated into an equilibrium.

Lao regards the reception of modernization in China as a form of intrusion and argues that its impacts on China have induced crises.⁷ Its effects have been forceful due to a sense of backwardness, as well as functional and instrumental. In the recent history of China, people have pursued technology, weapon-making and advancements in shipping due to the influence of wars and foreign relations, without a genuine understanding of the cultural foundation of these Western fascinations. An understanding of the organic cultural core and its outer manifestations led to Lao's critique of Zhang Zhidong's notion of "Chinese body and Western Practices" (中體西用), which is an attempt to justify modernization when Sino-European relations are rocky.⁸ The Hegelian mode that Lao identifies brings with it doubts about modernization and sadness about the loss of the tradition. He recognizes in Neo-Confucianism a kind of reformation of the core of Confucianism, and why he sees in Chinese Communism a political coincidence without the real social foundation and historical conditions that led to workers' revolutions elsewhere, such as in Russia.

⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ Ibid., 94.

Lao asks the following question: what part(s) of the Chinese tradition can be modified to make modernization possible and viable, and thus able to reproduce the results of Western advancements of which reformers are envious? According to Lao, no matter what parts these are, they must be something integral to the culture's core and to the related systems and attitudes in an organic whole. These structural parts can be static, but there are also dialectical factors in historical processes.⁹ Lao's critique of Neo-Confucianism is that its discourses refer to a static structure without taking into consideration historical dynamics and social impacts.

“Orientative Philosophy” (引導性哲學) and “Cognitive Philosophy” (認知性哲學)

One important theoretical distinction raised by Lao is the difference between “orientative philosophy” (引導性的哲學) and “cognitive philosophy” (認知性的哲學).¹⁰ He proposes that orientative philosophy aims at personal and social transformation, whereas cognitive philosophy enquires about truth claims and so-called objective knowledge. Confucianism, together with its morality discourses, is a form of orientative philosophy according to Lao. Its concern is what a person should become, in contrast to cognitive philosophy's aim to “know” things. Lao conducts a detailed reading of Confucianism as a form of moral philosophy and its problematics, at three levels.¹¹ The first level is basic reflection on the possibility and necessity of the related moral discourses. The second level is about moral will and moral lives; specifically, what motivates moral acts and related practices. The third level concerns moral order and moral education, and Lao reminds us of the possibility of replacing discourses of the moral core with social constructions. Lao argues that the moral core and social perspectives should be reviewed as a whole; that Confucians confine their attention only to its moral core has caused Confucianism's detachment from modernization.¹²

The Confucians' emphasis on subjectivity and transcendence manifests a philosophical paradigm very different from both cognitive and social discourses and the empirical sciences. In this context, Lao mentions the Parsonian model, a favorite sociological subject to which he often refers, as a contrast to the Confucian subjectivity discourse. He traces instrumental rationality as a driver of modernity back to an empirical model, which poses a great challenge to the transcendental subjectivity that Confucians advocate. Yet Lao adopts an optimistic and open attitude toward the difference between the two modalities, noting that both need to develop in the context of modernization. It is under this historical factor that complementation and supplementation may happen, and Lao therefore suggests the notion of “constructive consciousness,” which is another one of his representative subjects.¹³

The question remains: what are the open and closed elements in Confucianism that will contribute to its reform and strategies when facing the new world order?

⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, 154.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 159.

The Future Direction of Chinese Philosophy

Lao's vision of the future direction of Chinese philosophy is to understand and disseminate its particularities and suggest how they can meet social changes. He mentions two common attitudes that academics have advocated regarding Chinese philosophy: one is to understand it with the approach of cultural anthropology, the other is to see its agenda of personal moral transformation as a matter for religious studies.¹⁴ The approach of cultural anthropology, according to Lao, draws our attention to what people practice instead of why people do the things they do or the values behind these practices. He also recognizes the mystical and religious characteristics of Chinese philosophy in the eye of Westerners, who adopt a rational approach to philosophy. In addition to the discussion of "orientative philosophy" and "cognitive philosophy," Lao proposes that Chinese philosophy should become a part of world philosophy and that one should review its "open elements" with that purpose in mind.¹⁵

An important aspect that Lao attends to is the "Loss of Effects" (失效) of traditional Chinese culture when its traditions and related social structure fail to function in the new era. When modernization becomes necessary, it departs from being an instrumental value to a value in itself. Politics, economics, social structure and all ways of life are expected to follow the path of modernization. "Reform" and "modification" became slogans while the old society was disintegrating under deconstruction and new construction.¹⁶ Yet Lao sees only partial modernization in contemporary China because the movement was basically instrumental in nature, without a genuine understanding of the ethos and ideological support behind modernization, and its ideological foundation lay within the development of Western culture. Furthermore, the induction of the market economy in China was segregated from its Western origins, beliefs and historical conditions, which did not help the development of modernization in the new China. The situation is intriguing when the central Chinese government enforces modernization in a totalitarian manner, driven by a rationale that does not reference individual rights and freedoms.

The visions of the new China are political democracy, free economy, high efficiency, technological advancement, civil cultivation and the wish that these can help to promote the integration of its new society. However, these presuppose transformation of the closed elements of Chinese tradition and the full development of its open elements.

The Confucian Revival in China: A Recent Study by French Anthropologists

During the 2000s, two French cultural anthropologists, Sebastien Billoud and Joel Thoraval, conducted a field study in China to gain an understanding of the development of Confucian culture in China and its reception. Their work was published in 2015 in the book entitled *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*. It would be instructive to examine and review their approach and findings under the intellectual light shed by Lao.

¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192.

In recent years, the revival of Confucianism in China has generated an impressive literature. There has also been reappropriation and reinvention of popular practices, as the two cultural anthropologists have observed. They found that specialization and transformation of the ancient and multifaceted tradition in pure “thought” was merely the consequence of a recent—and maybe only temporary—historical evolution. After the loosening of the state’s grip in the post-Mao era, the Confucian tradition would be expected to generate new developments within the Chinese population.¹⁷

The two authors stress that philosophical questioning had to be complemented by sociological and anthropological fieldwork. Through this fieldwork, they find that ordinary people in Shandong province, for example, collectively reinvent and reappropriate practices designed to enable them to directly interact with the ancient sages. Obviously, Billoud and Thoraval find a manifestation of the idea of a “popular Confucianism” (minjianrujia 民間儒家).¹⁸ They basically share the view of Lao, namely that the Western invasion and its impacts led to the collapse of the imperial order in 1911, and that this resulted in a century of destruction, marginalization and radical transformation of the Chinese cultural tradition in the name of a modernizing nationalism. Although contemporary Neo-Confucianism has been developed in the form of a philosophical movement, ordinary people have been appropriating the teachings of the sage, and their ambition is not doctrinal but primarily practical.¹⁹

The Neo-Confucianism movement took advantage of Deng Xiaoping’s reform and open policy in the late 1970s, after which ordinary people attempted to reestablish part of their common legacy of ancestral temples (祠堂). It has been found that kinship relationships and religious practices became more important when the urban population started to increase rapidly at the expense of village life. This was a form of adaptation to social changes and unity of a community. Anthropologists have found that when Chinese villagers are involved in ancestor cults or in the revival of lineages, they do not necessarily feel any need to claim a Confucian identity. Instead of making philosophical enquiries, people are more likely to affiliate with a tradition reconstructed around Confucius and/or with a tradition Confucius symbolizes in some way.²⁰ This is not the consequence of a discourse promoted by the party-state, but something that happens especially when people are far away from their local roots of kinship or territory. An affiliation with Confucianism is even promoted via the Internet and networks.

It has been noted that in response to the rapid economic development in the 1980s, “Confucianism” was introduced not as an obstacle but as a beneficial factor encouraging the rise of an Asian brand of capitalism and the so-called “four little dragons.” A deeper reading of Billoud and Thoraval enables us to summarize the cult of Confucianism as follows: 1) it helps to disseminate the idea of a new type of modern authoritarianism

¹⁷ Billoud, S., and Thoraval, J., *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

among political Chinese elites of the Deng Xiaoping era; 2) it demonstrates an ambition to go beyond dogmatic Marxism; 3) it manifests the confidence of a nation in its own power; and 4) it is a signal to the nation to exert its influence on the global stage. The new formation of a Confucian power is a statement to correct the ideology of so-called “Asianism.” In a more concrete sense, it is within a national framework that an official ideology with a seemingly traditional accent emerged in the 2000s.²¹

“Popular Confucianism”

The popularity of Confucianism as a movement, as analyzed by Lao and now confirmed by anthropologists in the field, is linked to the destruction of institutional forms that took place after the fall of the empire in earlier eras and then during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. The new, so-called “popular Confucianism” is a form of institution that has revived a ritual system similar to the imperial order. Yet at the same time, it is new in that people from all walks of life—technicians, workers, and peasants—may now enter the Mencius or Confucius temples for rituals. This constitutes a kind of transgression, as these commoners had no access to the temples in the tradition’s past.²²

Billoud and Thoraval see the phenomenon of popular Confucianism as a striving for psychological balance or therapeutic effect for the communities in the new China. This is a time of moral crisis driven by the rapid growth of the economy, or the so-called “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” although nobody really understands what this term really means. Anthropologists recognize the manifestations of greed and egoism: the cult of money (*baijinzhuyi* 拜金主義), selfishness at the expense of justice (*jian li wangyi* 見利忘義), neglect of the common good and development of private desires (*sun gong feisi* 損公肥私) among their interviewees and subjects of study.

Billoud and Thoraval note that the opposition of the Western-inspired “modernity” and a Chinese “tradition” in scholarly discourse does not exist anymore, but identification with the new modernized and even post-modernized era are common. There are critiques of “tradition” represented in an imperial past and the authoritarianism of the Maoist era as a great leap into new forms of “feudalism.” Now, the cultural tradition is translated into a repertoire of concrete objects, symbols or ways of behaving that have been reinvented.²³ The anthropologists share Lao’s observation of anti-Confucianism and the concurrent revival of its new types, but they also recognize new, institutionalized brands of Confucianism claiming a religious dimension, or a creative mixture of the “politico-religious” or “theologico-political” forms.

As a form of cult and religion, popular Confucianism is therapeutic and functional. Its worshippers seek real transformation and redemption from secular Confucianism, and they are looking for a direction in life. The Billoud and Thoraval field study in Shangdong province reveals that people organize classics readings for their children and

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 12.

employees for the purpose of personal cultivation. Confucian teaching is seen as relevant in a more general way for the destiny of humanity, and interviewees believe Confucianism is a solution to the world's problems.²⁴ This belief is now shared among entrepreneurs who feel invested with social responsibility. They consider Confucianism a tradition that is likely to contribute to the common good. In many cases, Confucianism is a fulfillment rather than a refuge in the wake of personal crisis.²⁵ In other cases, entrepreneurs turned to Confucianism after a traumatic experience in the business world.

One can find numerous reasons for the rise of popular Confucianism in China. Laymen in popular Confucianism may be confused and feel adrift when they need to do things contradictory to their most basic Confucian moral principles, which they learned in their childhood. Billoud and Thoraval find that the common moral principles among laymen still include trust (xin 信), sincerity (cheng 誠) and filial piety (xiao 孝). When people face personal turmoil in the new economic regime in China, there follows an increased interest in the reinvented Confucian rites of passage.²⁶ These principles and practices also feed the mental needs of people in the post-Cultural Revolution generations whose unfortunate experiences in youth have generated a cognitive need and a quest for meaning in life. In brief, there are patterns of "conversion" that contribute to the diversity of experiences leading to Confucian religiosity, although some may turn to the Buddhist faith instead of religious Confucianism.

New Confucianism in China and Confucian Religiosity

Billoud and Thoraval report that religious practices in China are theoretically and practically forbidden outside places of worship. Yet Confucianism, as a form of Chinese philosophy as situated by Lao, is not considered a religion but a set of shared beliefs and self-cultivation practices. As the two anthropologists put it, Confucianism is generally placed in the vague categories of culture and morals. Yet the recent revival demonstrates that Confucianism has acted as a form of civic religion with rituals and worship.²⁷ According to field reports, various groups or classes of followers sometimes downplay the function of the master Confucius as an object of worship and instead emphasize the self-transformation or self-liberation dimension of Confucianism. In other words, it is most important to follow one's own original heart/mind (*benxin* 本心). The conclusion is that people involved in popular Confucianism do not conflate Confucian *teaching* (*jiao*) with the conception of a religious institution (*zongjiao*) imported from the Christian West.²⁸

Billoud and Thoraval also report a remarkable trend of reactivation of the master-disciple relationship in the current Confucian revival. These followers, like those in some religions, give up their former jobs and start daily reading of the classics and related

²⁴ Ibid., 113.

²⁵ Ibid., 114.

²⁶ Ibid., 115.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

“spiritual exercises.” They even form *sisshu* (私塾) and enroll children, thereby reviving the spirit and practices of Song-Ming Confucianism. Obviously, things changed in the 2000s, which featured debates from the republican era that focused on the relations between religion and politics. Cultural anthropologists have asked what status could be ascribed to Confucian religion in a post-Maoist era, and have come up with four possible options.²⁹

1. Confucianism can be institutionalized as a religion, like any other religion recognized by the state.
2. It can occupy a central position within a syncretistic religious movement and lobby to be legalized.
3. It can gain a privileged position in the religious landscape if it is turned into a “national teaching” or a “state religion.”
4. It can be reinterpreted as a form of modern civil religion in the American sense.

All of these options would be difficult to induce in the new China. The current Chinese regulations still recognize only five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Christian Protestantism. Nevertheless, anthropologists argue for a sixth religion with its own special needs and meanings, based on the views gathered from the group of subjects who want to institutionalize Confucianism as a force to “strengthen unity and national cohesion” (*qianghuaminzu de tuanjiyuningjuli* 強化民族的團結與凝聚力). The basic view is that Confucian teaching is the best possible solution for the promotion of “spiritual civilization,” which should be endorsed by the authorities to accompany the “material civilization” facilitated by the new capitalist development, whether political, economic or technical.³⁰

The political and social controls under the strong leadership of Xi Jinping have made things more difficult for such an endorsement to happen. Still, Billoud and Thoraval note that the first Confucius hall, inaugurated in 2009 in Shenzhen’s Donghu park, is in a building that looks like a new version of a Confucian place of worship (*daochang* 道場). The field reports record a large room with an altar, a representation of the sage and an incense burner. It is primarily used for rituals, practice of traditional music and classics reading courses. In 2010, the Kongshengtang (孔聖堂) was officially registered as a non-governmental organization affiliated with another structure based in Qufu, Shandong, and local authorities are invited to its activities.³¹ The anthropologists call it “the Shenzhen model” (深圳模式), the basic philosophy of which is to promote a number of secular activities such as weddings, funeral rites and training sessions for the implementation of a “Confucian corporate culture” in companies.³² The Kongshengtang intends to be a transitory instrument to promote a Confucian religiosity that would

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

³² *Ibid.*, 155.

coexist with other spiritual traditions, despite its unclear legal status for the time being. Billoud and Thoraval's interviewees reveal their hopes that Confucianism will become China's state religion in the future.

Another current of Confucianism in the new China is its appropriation by syncretistic religious movements, as recorded by anthropologists. This movement advocates a "way of pervading unity," or Yiguandao (貫道). The belief is old in that the Dao is considered to be the source of the five teachings mentioned and, in turn, each of the five teachings is considered a practical path of self-cultivation toward the Dao. Adherents voice the Yiguandao's claim to be "primarily Confucian" (*yiruweizong* 以儒為宗), as China is supposed to have a "mainstream tradition" (*zhuliuchuantong* 主流傳統), and they aim to have it legalized (*guojiao* 國教) as proposed by Zhou Beichen (周北辰). This raises the question of the complicated but poignant claims of the "theologico-political" or of the "politico-religious" and the arguable claim of *zhijiaoyiti, sheng su fen quan* (治教一體, 聖俗分權), namely that the Confucian church should be endowed with the power to educate whereas "the secular king will dispose of the power to govern."³³

Bearing in mind Lao's differentiation between Confucianism as the Chinese philosophy and philosophical enquiries in China, we should review what constitutes the Confucian core. If Confucianism is Chinese philosophy, it is debatable whether it can be a religion per se; however, it may manifest as religiosity or have a religious dimension. The Confucian core may be characterized as follows: Chinese culture believes in the interrelation and correspondence between heaven and humanity, and the interpenetration of the sacred and profane. The sacredness of humanity refers to its unique moral nature, or at least the "seeds" of that unique moral nature. It is through the development of this inherent nature, these seeds, that one achieves sagehood. A sage manifests the benevolence of nature in both thought and action. This already has elements of a religious dimension. (The moral nature of the human, as understood by Confucianism, should not be confused with the word "nature" in the sense of Western naturalism. For Confucians, human nature is understood as the moral consciousness and practice that emanate from an internal or inherent awareness rather than obedience to social norms, doctrines or calls from an external, transcendent being.)

Although Confucianism can be considered a form of humanism, it involves belief in the interpenetration of the sacred and secular, which makes it a religious humanism or a humanism with a strong religious dimension. This interpenetration of the sacred and secular can also be seen in the Confucian notion of *li* or rite. Unlike Western traditions, which separate the sacred and profane by enclosing the sacred within religious rituals, Confucianism ritualizes everyday practices. In this sense, every act, no matter how seemingly insignificant, has a religious dimension.

Discussions of religious dimensions versus ethical or political dimensions are modern questions. The conditions under which traditional Confucianism can be

³³ *Ibid.*, 163.

considered to have a religious dimension include the following.

1. Our definition of religion cannot be restricted to only the existence of a High God or a transcendent or personal God. Traditional Confucianism has been called a tradition in which the religious dimension is founded on the “immanent transcendental” structure of the human mind. The human mind is transcendent because it is ontologically related to and correspondent with heaven; conversely, the nature of heaven is imparted to and internalized as moral consciousness. In this sense, morality for Confucianism is always religious.
2. If we consider some of the modern definitions of the religious dimension, such as Tillich’s notion of “ultimate concern,” traditional Confucianism should definitely be considered a religion. Its main concern is the ultimate ground and meaning of one’s present life, which is a manifestation of the divine nature of human beings imparted by the way or heaven.
3. Some contemporary forms of Confucianism, as observed and reported by cultural anthropologists studying popular Confucianism, have doctrinal aspects and related practices. Such doctrines as filial piety or loyalty may seem on the surface to be merely ethical, but when understood within the context of the correspondence between heaven and earth, these “earthly” practices take on “heavenly” dimensions. Salvation comes not through a savior but through the realization of true nature (which is also the realization of Universal nature). The Confucian text *Chung Yung* (or *The Doctrine of the Mean*) says it all: “Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, and can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth” (*Chung Yung*, chapter 22, trans. Chan Wing-tist). In this sense, Confucianism can be described as a “moral religion.”

It should be added to this philosophical review that all of the debates and hegemonic claims about Confucianism may be reduced to ways of expressing a more basic sentiment, namely the need to strengthen a brand of cultural nationalism. This strengthening is deemed necessary in the context of globalization, under which claims for cultural identity have become important. A related view is that the state should “support the Confucian teaching (*rujiao* 儒教) and ascribe to it the status of national teaching (*guojiao* 國教).” As the Billoud and Thoraval field report concludes, Confucianism has been introduced as the future “religion of the people” to serve the totalizing action of state power controlling politics, education and culture.³⁴

Chinese Confucianism and Confucianism in Contemporary China

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

The findings of cultural anthropologists bring us back to Lao's differentiation of Chinese philosophy and philosophies in China. The name of Chen Ming, the founder of the journal *Yuandao*, together with his defense of a "Mainland Contemporary Confucianism" (*dalu de xinrujia* 大陸新儒家), is introduced by Billoud and Thoraval in this context. Chen is critical of the metaphysical claims of MouZongs and Tang Junyi, who reside outside of the mainland. He is suspicious of an all-encompassing philosophical system and has advocated for a practical, social and popular role for contemporary Confucianism. Chen became interested in the religious status of Confucianism in a post-Maoist society and began to refer to the American civil religion model. He later suggested Confucianism as a form of "civil religion" (*gongminzongjiao* 公民宗教).³⁵

Chen further proposes the institutionalization of Confucianism, suggesting that its structural characteristics can communicate with popular beliefs and be linked to political institutions.³⁶ He elaborates that civil religion could nourish itself through vibrant elements rather than ideological discourse disconnected from the lives of the people. Chen is critical of the metaphysical claims and the all-encompassing character of Chinese philosophy; however, his goal is to deal with contemporary social issues in more practical ways. Like the anthropologists, and as Lao comments, Chen does not consider the review or evaluation of Confucianism's philosophical core and its organic values system, but rather paves the way for a political or social instrumentalization of Confucianism.

Even the anthropologists who have, according to Lao, put aside the philosophical discourses of Chinese philosophy would say new efforts to turn Confucianism into a form of civil religion will "only encourage the feeling of a fictional continuity with the imperial past, and hinder the reflection on a consubstantial link between civil religion and the idea of a society of citizens."³⁷ They remind us of the opposition met from both outside and inside Confucian circles. They have observed two main tensions: first, the ill-defined intermediary space between the force of spiritual quests expressing a desire for religion without necessarily materializing in actual practices; and second, the reality of communal and individual practices that are still scattered and looking for an institutional setting.³⁸

Here I would like to quote Billoud and Thoraval's observation of the second tension, as it articulates in its fullness that "there is an unresolved tension between an aspiration toward official institutional recognition, and a claim to the autonomous existence of a Confucian teaching whose value is reflected in people's beliefs rather than state-sponsored projects. The role of the state is a sensitive and difficult issue due to the twists and turns of the last century's political history."³⁹ They remind us to take into account a

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

form of mediation that could link individual feelings and collective behaviors, as well as political authority and popular practices.⁴⁰

While cultural anthropologists do not conduct philosophical analysis of Confucianism at its core, as Lao has correctly pointed out, they and their fieldwork do contribute tremendously to discovering what happens to Confucianism in the contemporary context of China. Their field study findings confirm some of Lao's earlier reading of the *xi* of Confucianism today, including its functions and impacts on society in some historical situations. Their findings depict the objective situation that has led to certain social needs and responses, and hence what Confucianism has developed into recently in China: a Chinese traditional cultural product in action.

Lao reminds us of the possibility of the replacing discourses of the moral core by social constructions. He argues that both the moral core and social perspectives should be reviewed as a whole. Let us be reminded of the two common attitudes that academics have advocated for Chinese philosophy, as suggested by Lao: one is to understand it through the approach of cultural anthropology, and the other is to attend to its main agenda of personal moral transformation.⁴¹ He mentions three levels of concern of the latter:⁴² the basic reflection on the possibility and necessity of the related moral discourses; the moral will and moral lives, including the specificities of what motivates moral acts and the related practices; and finally, moral order and moral education. Although Lao notes the possibility of replacing discourses of the moral core by social construction, he adopts an optimistic and open attitude towards the two forms, for both must develop in the context of modernization. It is under this historical factor that complementation and supplementation may happen, and his suggestion of the notion of "constructive consciousness" requires further exploration.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lao, 163.

⁴² Ibid., 150.