

# Commentary on the Thought of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China

Ru Jia

School of Marxism, Xijing University, Xi'an, 710123, Shaanxi, China

523290267@qq.com

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**Abstract:** Cultural conservatism has exerted a profound influence on the whole of modern China and gained new development in the contemporary era. This paper briefly introduces the reasons and basic viewpoints of the rise of cultural conservatism in contemporary China, analyses and comments on its value and limitations, and provides a scientific attitude for a correct view of cultural conservatism in contemporary China.

Cultural conservatism, as one of the main contemporary social trends of thought, has been widely disseminated in China. It has been recognized in the inheritance and protection of traditional culture, but it has been criticized in the political point of view. It is inevitable that there are different praises and criticisms for it. Generally speaking, the trend of thought of cultural conservatism in contemporary China has exerted a certain influence, but its influence is not very great, and it stays at the academic level, has not entered the process of "social engineering", and has not had a substantial impact on economic, political and social construction.

## 1. Brief Introduction to the Cultural Conservatism Trend of Thought in Contemporary China

Cultural conservatism, if understood literally, is the protection of culture. It is a worldwide cultural trend with the basic characteristics of identifying, returning and defending the national cultural tradition, which is caused by the expansion of Western capitalist modernization. In the United States, "cultural conservatism" may imply a conservative position in the cultural war. The emergence of Chinese cultural conservatism has a different background from the West. Its emergence is a reflection of the double crisis of Chinese and Western culture in the field of ideology and culture.

### 1.1 The Rise of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China.

Cultural conservatism has a long history in China. It began with the "source of Western learning is from China" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the "use of Chinese culture in the West" in the late Qing Dynasty. Cultural conservatism has experienced the nourishment of the "theory of superiority of Oriental culture" in the May 4th period, the "theory of culture construction based on Chinese culture" in the 1930s, the "cultural fever" and the "sinology fever" in the 1980s and 1990s, and has gradually become a climate in the wave of reform and opening up. In the 1980s, the voice of "re-evaluating Confucius and Confucianism" began to appear in the Chinese cultural circles. In the 1990s, "New Confucianism on the Mainland" entered the public vision. Until around 2004, a series of important events marked the beginning of a new stage of Chinese cultural conservatism.

Establishing academies and holding special forums. In 2001, Mr. Jiang Qing founded YangMingJingShe, the most ancient modern academy, to disseminate Confucianism. In July 2004, famous scholars such as Chen Ming, Liang Zhiping, Sheng Hong and Kang Xiaoguang were invited to participate the forumt called "the contemporary destiny of Confucianism".

Carry out Classic Reading Movement. *Recitation of Classic Basic Education of Chinese Culture* by jiang qing was published. At that time, this book became the unified final edition of the Tenth Five-Year Plan experimental book of the Chinese Education Association and the national unified final edition of "Children's Classic Reading Evaluation Activities".

Convening a forum and issuing a declaration. Initiated by Xu Jialu, Ji Xianlin, Yang Zhenning, Ren Jiyu and Wang Meng, the "2004 Cultural Summit Forum" sponsored by the Chinese Cultural Promotion Association was held in Beijing, and also issued the famous *Jiashen Cultural Declaration*, aiming at "expressing our cultural views to our compatriots at home and abroad and to the international community".[1]

The tenth anniversary of the publication of the *Origin Way*. *Origin Way* is an academic and ideological journal founded in 1994 by Chen Ming, the representative of the "New Confucianism in the Mainland", which is regarded as the banner and symbol of the re-emergence of Confucianism in the mainland of China in the contemporary era. "Nowadays, *Origin Way* has moved from paper publications to new platforms such as internet, and has become a platform for the dissemination of Confucian culture with great influence".[2]

Therefore, the trend of thought of cultural conservatism in contemporary China refers to the "cultural fever" and "sinology fever" that emerged after the 1980s and 1990s, until the "cultural conservatism year" in 2004, the "revival year of Confucianism" in 2005, and today's cultural conservatism trend of thought. It affirms and advocates classical culture, based on Chinese native culture and traditional Confucian culture, and strives especially to restore the ontology and dominant position of Confucian tradition. On this basis, it selectively absorbs foreign cultures to meet the needs of the times and seek the realistic outlet of Chinese culture and even Chinese society.

## **1.2 Basic Views of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China.**

The basic value orientation of contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism is to maintain the consciousness of traditional culture and to maintain and carry forward traditional culture.

Contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism advocates returning to the national value tradition, affirms the value of Chinese traditional culture, treats modern society more openly, and accepts capitalist cultural achievements to a limited extent. They believe that "Traditional culture is our lifeblood and the root of our nation. It has been deeply rooted in the depths of our soul, lingering and can't cutting away. We must cherish the excellent traditional culture of our nation. A person who disrespects or even despises his traditional culture is like a wandering wanderer who will inevitably fall into a tragic situation of being homeless. "[3] Cultural conservatives emphasize the importance of "tradition", has carried on the systematic study and exposition of Chinese traditional culture, promote the traditional culture and emphasize the national character of culture, prove the special value of Chinese culture, reveal the quantitative and gradual changes in cultural changes, and exposing and criticizing the malpractice of western culture, oppose copying Western culture and emphasize the principle of cultural change, that is, we must follow the good.

On the basis of rebuilding the Confucian value system, it is the main idea of cultural conservatism in contemporary China to seek the modernization of China's economy and society.

Contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism advocates a "theory of superiority of Chinese culture" and attaches great importance to the value of local cultural resources, but it is not only content with the field of cultural value orientation and moral cultivation, but also advocates the transformation of Confucianism into politics and society on the basis of Confucian culture. Politically, it calls for returning to Chinese history and Confucian tradition to seek the ideological resources for rebuilding the political and spiritual order of contemporary China, asserting that only by taking the road of "Confucianism" can China have a bright prospect of national rejuvenation. Taking "New Confucianism on the Mainland" as the representative, they put forward a set of theories, routes, principles, policies and Strategies of Confucianized China, such as Kang Xiaoguang's article based on the Confucian theory of "benevolent government". They put forward that the principle of Confucianism is peaceful evolution and transformed China into a "Confucian community dictatorship". They also advocated that China should be transformed into a "Confucian state" and that the "three-chamber system of Confucian parliament" should be implemented to realize the control and control of the state power through such parliaments and "governments" of the "Confucian state".

## **2. Reasons for the Rise of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China**

### **2.1 Cultural Inheritance and Development.**

The development of the times requires the inheritance and innovation of culture to provide necessary values and ways of thinking for the progress of society. Almost all intellectuals in China since modern times have understood the basic fact that the success of the modern industrial revolution in the West is due to the emancipation of the mind, that is, the Renaissance of the West in modern times, which liberated the West from the shackles of Theology in the Middle Ages and also realized the industrial revolution under the ideological banner of freedom, democracy and science. Therefore, after more than a hundred years of independent struggle and subsequent social movements, and after the successful economic reform and opening-up, the first ideological movement of contemporary Chinese scholars is to put forward the requirements for the revival of traditional culture and a shift has been made from cultural radicalism to cultural conservatism in recent years. The Chinese scholars have made unremitting efforts to revive traditional culture in contemporary Chinese society.

"Why is the water in that pond so clear? Because there is an inexhaustible source of water for it." The Chinese nation has a long history of civilization for 5,000 years, and new cultures from generation to generation have maintained the thread of 5,000 years. If thousands of years of civilization in our time to decline, then innovation as the soul of cultural development is the best way out. Today, China is at the forefront of the international arena with its proud economic development achievements, but lacks characteristics and competitiveness in the field of culture. The United States has a history of only a few hundred years and no extensive and profound cultural heritage. However, the United States has influenced the world with its strong and vibrant modern culture. Japan's animation, Korean film and television culture are sweeping across our country with a surge of momentum, depending on their innovative ability. In modern society, many people, especially young people, blindly pursue fashion and stimulation, but they know little about the traditional culture of antique flavor, let alone cherish and utilize it. Forty years of reform and opening up have fully proved that only material progress is not enough, but also the synchronous construction of the spirit of the times. The contemporary Chinese cultural conservatives may be advocating Chinese traditional culture from the historical continuity and the direction of civilization development. Do not throw away the tradition, take the essence and discard the dross, and achieve simultaneous development of inheritance and innovation.

### **2.2 Moral Imperfection and Reconstruction.**

In 2004, cultural conservatism formally rose in China, and the "classics reading movement" set off waves. In May 2004, Jiang Qing's *Recitation of Classic Basic Education of Chinese Culture* was published in Beijing. In an interview with *Bund Pictorial*, Jiang Qing said that the biggest problem in contemporary China is moral collapse. He described the current situation of contemporary morality with "The moral degeneration of society is getting worse.", and holds that Chinese morality exists in the tradition of Confucian culture. Contemporary China has gone through 40 years of reform and opening up, while achieving tremendous social progress and achieving higher and higher material living standards for the general public, it has undergone the normal social development process of imbalance of social morality. In all aspects of social life, such as economy, social order, marriage, social identity, social mentality, there are moral imbalances that can not be ignored.

For example, moral reconstruction is urgently needed in economic development. Honesty and credit is an indispensable factor in the moral concept of ancient Chinese traditional culture. In modern Chinese society, honesty and credit have been playing an indispensable role in regulating social moral order as a basic moral norm. However, since the Chinese society entered the reform and opening up, the ancient social moral norm of honesty and credit has been impacted and challenged by the market economy, and ultimately lost in the stimulation of people's pursuit of material interests. Over the years, there have been countless examples of material desire defeating moral

integrity, taking the initiative to save people from being framed and claiming medical expenses, tax evasion in business activities, corruption of officials, etc. The phenomenon of lack of integrity can be seen everywhere, so that the public gradually chose to avoid rescue in the process of hearing and witnessing such negative cases. This abnormal social behavior deserves the consideration of the whole society. Everyone of us will feel the negative impact of lack of honesty on our life in social life. The emergence of such incidents as big head dolls caused by poor quality milk powder, poisonous leek, poisonous fans and poisonous rice, etc. Is not only the emotional indifference and social disorder caused by lack of honesty, but also that more terrible is the great threat to our life and health.

Behind the mentality of contemporary Chinese cultural conservatives to restore the status of traditional Chinese culture is a social need to find a cure for the imbalance of morality in China's social and economic development. Confucianism is the cultural carrier that is famous for morality and truly influences the moral tradition of Chinese Society for two thousand years. Nowadays, how to make the society pursuing economic development accept the excellent ideas and social traditions of Confucian culture has become an important topic of the cultural conservatism in contemporary China.

### **3. The Value and Limitation of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China**

#### **3.1 The Value of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China.**

Contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism is conducive to creating a social atmosphere in which the excellent traditional Chinese culture can be viewed in an all-round way from the perspective of combining inheritance with criticism.

For a long time, one of the basic errors in people's view of Chinese traditional culture is that the value criteria of western modern culture are often used as the ultimate criterion to judge the merits and demerits of Chinese culture. Although Chinese tradition cultural and western modern culture do differ from each other in time, they also differ from each other in nationality. To weigh Chinese culture with the value system of western culture will cause a problem, that is, the national characteristics of those Chinese cultures which are different from those of Western cultures are often regarded as deficiencies. Correspondingly, the exciting point of cultural conservatism theory is precisely the national character of culture, so it is often able to affirm and elaborate the unique national characteristics of Chinese culture ignored or biased by Westernizers, although there are many biases. The flourishing of cultural conservatism and its criticism of the cultural radicalism of Westernization that provide a useful reference that in the construction of contemporary Chinese culture, we not only pay attention to criticizing national character with modernity in order to eliminate its dross, but also to criticizing modernity with nationality in order to finally establish a new modern culture with Chinese national characteristics and to contribute the wisdom and spirit of Chinese culture to mankind.

The conservatism of contemporary Chinese culture is helpful to further strengthen the subjectivity of national culture in contemporary Chinese cultural construction and better absorb foreign culture represented by Western culture.

Learning from the West undoubtedly constitutes an important prerequisite for the reconstruction of modern Chinese culture. However, in modern history, China has gone through a difficult and tortuous road to learn from the West. The reason is that it has not really upheld the subjectivity of national culture. It is not based on the needs of the times of China's cultural construction, taking me as the main body and using it for my own use, actively and consciously analyzing, criticizing and choosing the western culture, but passively accepting the western culture or simply following the western culture actively and consciously. Historical experience has shown that Chinese culture, a cultural system with both national characteristics and a long history, can not stand up for national subjectivity and ultimately establish a modern culture with national characteristics, but attempt to "modernize" on the premise of completely abandoning national traditions. The result can only be contrary to one's wishes. Cultural conservatism is to strengthen the subjectivity consciousness of

national culture in an extreme form in the transitional period of contemporary Chinese cultural construction from emphasizing "breaking" to emphasizing "standing". This is of positive significance to a certain extent in promoting the people to consciously adhere to the subjectivity of national culture.

### **3.2 Limitations of Cultural Conservatism in Contemporary China.**

Confucian culture can not fully represent Chinese traditional culture.

Confucianism has always been regarded as the representative of Chinese traditional culture, so when Chinese scholars put forward the banner of reviving Confucianism, people naturally think that the revival of Confucianism is the revival of traditional culture. What is Chinese traditional culture? Can Confucian culture fully represent Chinese traditional culture? In fact, traditional culture is not a specific school of thought or an artistic form, but a opinion about value and a mode of thinking that can cover all excellent traditional cultures in time and space. Its most prominent feature is that it can maintain an open mind to different excellent cultures. The concept of "traditional culture" has the most essential characteristics of human culture. Its extension can cover all valuable and excellent cultures created by human beings in the history. We can attribute it to an open cultural mentality and values that have guiding significance for the development and progress of human society. However, its connotation is so small that it can not be replaced by any specific cultural form. From this point of view, the limitations of cultural conservatism in contemporary China lie in that in the field of ideology and culture, the Confucian culture formed and played a leading role in a certain historical stage is regarded as the whole of Chinese traditional culture. The direct consequence of this limitation is that in the most essential sense of traditional culture, it obliterates the significance and value of other excellent traditional cultures in Chinese history. On the one hand, it causing the withering of the connotation of Chinese traditional culture, on the other hand it leads the innovation and development of the real Chinese traditional culture to the muddy land of controversy over the past hundred years, such as Confucianism and autocracy, Confucianism and traditional culture. Historically, after the thorough criticism and abandonment of Confucianism's social system and ideology culture by the May 4th New Culture Movement, Confucianism seems to have only one symbol left in the culture of contemporary Chinese society. The general public even does not know what Confucianism is, it is impossible to apply Confucianism as a representative of traditional culture in life. In this sense, Confucian culture can not fully represent China's traditional culture and further play a leading role.

Cultural conservatism is not equal to cultural conservatism and paranoia.

From the standpoint of traditional Chinese culture, contemporary Chinese cultural conservatives strive to maintain the purity of traditional Chinese culture and strengthen its core influence in the era of rapid change. It is good. However, this conservative trend of thought is apt to fall into the quagmire of retro-culture, conservatism and rigidity, facing other cultures with a bipolar opposite and either-or thinking pattern, thus excluding integration into the tide of globalization and refusing to absorb modern civilization. Contemporary Chinese cultural conservatives simply attribute the revival of traditional culture to the revival of Confucianism or "returning to Confucius", unintentionally interrupting the way for our contemporary society to draw nutrition from other valuable ideological resources in ancient times. If we look back at the Renaissance in the modern West, Obviously, the Renaissance in modern times in the West is not to really restore the classical culture of the West, but to absorb valuable ideological factors from the ideological source of classical culture, to create new ideas and values in line with the development of the times. In a sense, the contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism, as the opposite of the theory of wholesale westernization in the history of modern Chinese thought, has a paranoid mentality on culture. This point can be confirmed by the full recognition of the contemporary Chinese cultural conservatives to the early cultural conservatism trends such as the modern Neo-Confucianism and the full affirmation of the basic program of the cultural conservatism of "Chinese-style Western-use". Related to this is their biased attitude towards Marxism. On the one hand, cultural conservatives do not recognize that Sinicization of Marxism has been integrated into the Chinese national culture; on

the other hand, in the criticism of Chinese modern and contemporary cultural radicalism, some people even attribute the cultural trend of thought of Sinicizing Marxism to "cultural radicalism". Therefore, the limitations of cultural conservatism in contemporary China are still more obvious, too much emphasis on "returning to tradition", blindly following the old ways is not the real way out, cultivating a mature and open cultural mentality is the correct development path.

#### **4. Viewing Contemporary Chinese Cultural Conservatism from a Scientific Perspective**

##### **4.1 Viewing Contemporary Chinese Cultural Conservatism with Historical Thinking.**

The so-called historical perspective is to examine the cultural conservatism that has emerged in China since modern times as a historical process from the perspective of Marxist historical materialism. Under the situation of the blending of Chinese and Western cultures, modern and ancient cultures, cultural conservatism has been handed down from generation to generation for three centuries, so we can not simply deny the historical rationality of its existence.[4]

Cultural conservatism is based on not only five thousand years of strong Chinese traditional culture, but also on the nationalist consciousness that has been raised since modern times. Behind cultural conservatism is a kind of conscious consciousness and instinctive attachment to traditional culture, which sprays out when confronted with the collision of multi-cultures. However, we must clearly realize that cultural conservatism will inevitably decline on the road of overpublicizing local culture and ignoring the development trend of modern civilization. "History, like knowledge, will never end in a perfect ideal state of human beings; a perfect society and a perfect country are things that can only exist in fantasy; on the contrary, all successive historical states are only temporary steps in the infinite development process of human society from low to high. Paragraph. Every stage is inevitable, so there are reasons for its existence for the times and conditions in which it took place; but for the new and higher conditions gradually developed within itself, it becomes obsolete and no reason for its existence; It has to give way to a higher stage, which is also going to decline and perish." [5] The future of cultural conservatism is no exception.

##### **4.2 Viewing Contemporary Chinese Cultural Conservatism with Dialectical Thinking.**

The so-called dialectical view is to use Marxist materialist dialectics to analyze the theory and practice of cultural conservatism comprehensively and systematically and adopt a split-in-two attitude, affirming its positive side in the process of contemporary Chinese social development, while acknowledging its negative side and not doing "one size fits all".

Only by looking at Chinese traditional culture dialectically and correctly straightening out the relationship between Chinese and Western cultures can we find a bright way for the modern transformation of Chinese traditional culture for 5000 years. "If 'Revival of Sinology' is understood fairly as supplementary courses and basic construction in knowledge and education, there will be no problem. What has caused controversy and constituted the problem is the attempt to restore the orthodox status of traditional thought and bring China back to the era of 'respecting only confucianism', what is more, it does not regard Confucianism as 'cultural Confucianism', but advocates 'political Confucianism', denies the modern political principle of 'people's authorization', and take the law of the celestial body, bloodlines, and sages as the source of state power. Ideological Confucianism and Political Confucianism are unrealistic and absurd at a glance. If the movement for the revival of Sinology has long given the impression that its purpose and content are ideological Confucianism and political Confucianism, and it endorses the basic ideas of those who speak in the posture of religious masters and spiritual leaders, and that it is dominated by a kind of fundamentalist spirit, then the future of the revival of Sinology is worth worrying about." [6] Faced with the vast world situation and the rapidly changing trend of the times in the new century, cultural conservatism, if it does not revise its own views, always deviates from the subjective consciousness and moves against the historical trend, the result they pursue is like a flower in the mirror, the moon in the water, end in endless disappointment.

In short, for the contemporary Chinese cultural conservatism, we should treat it historically,

respect differences and tolerate diversity, and dialectically analyze, extract its essence and remove its dross so that it can be compatible with contemporary society, coordinate with modern civilization, maintain national character and reflect the times.

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