

## Confucius and Confucianism's Influence Reflected in Voltaire's Ideology

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*Abstract: Confucius and Voltaire were both living in a period of transformation when the old systems and cultures were replaced with new ones. Although there is an insurmountable space-time distance from Yin to Zhou dynasties of China to 18th century France, people's awareness of reasonable religious cult is increasingly improving, which becomes the common anxiety of these two great thinkers. Confucius' and Confucianism's influence not only justifies the antiquity and universality of the natural religions, but also greatly enlightens Voltaire and enriches his thoughts. In essence, Voltaire sincerely admires Confucius' realistic pursuit that displays humanity, and speaks highly of the purity and nobility of Chinese Confucianism, which make his ideological content full of humanity.*

*Key words: Confucius, Confucianism, Voltaire, Chinese government, French autocratic monarchy system*

### INTRODUCTION

Confucius and Confucianism's influence has not only had a great impact on Chinese culture, but also played a great role in promoting the development of the world (Schwartz, 1985). Voltaire's enthusiasm towards Confucius and Confucianism make the serious and full-scale Voltaire related research impossible without mention of the name of Confucius. When Voltaire reads supreme God who rewards good and punishes bad in *Higher Education*, an important work of Confucianism, he immediately identifies with this "God" who is reasonable and makes people have intelligent power, and cannot wait to claim that Confucius' interpretation of God is as pure and beautiful as the human mind can conceive. Moreover, Voltaire also finds that what he yearns for in Confucianism are also advocated by fellows of the Society of Jesus. He joyfully said that people would not see any miracle, any prophecy, or even any political trick played by forefathers of other countries, which makes the earliest classics in China much superior to all the other books of national origin. Although there exists obvious exaggeration in these praise words, the Five Classics compiled by Confucius outclass other national ancient classics in terms of its realistic features.

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#### ***Confucian "View of Destiny" corresponding to Voltaire's "Deism"***

In the literature about China popular in France, fellows of the Society of Jesus believe that the religion in China is sort of theism similar to that of Christianity, which combines oracle and nationalization. However, fellows of Paris Foreign Missions Society cites that Chinese religion is polytheistic and superstitious, which such enlightenment scholars as Nicolas Malebranche believes that Chinese is atheist. Voltaire, however, scoffs at these views and differentiates the materials by means of his own philosophy and then sets up such a view of China for the Europeans as follows: if there is religion in China, then it must be Confucianism represented by Confucius.

Voltaire holds that Chinese religion refers to the belief of "view of destiny" proposed by Confucianism. Voltaire thinks that people misconstrue this view at that time and gives a

series of examples to prove that Chinese government and Confucian scholars, identify with the concept of “Heaven”, which is regarded as another name of “God”. Confucius believed that heaven, earth and man are consistent, and man should live in harmony with nature (Hall and Ames, 1998). This saint is the unshakable law of nature instead of a personalized idol. That’s why he holds that Confucianism corresponds to this sort of deism.

Therefore, the religion in China can by no means be confused with Christianity. Because eternal soul and future world do not appear in the Confucianism that gets rid of all traces of superstition and barbarity. Moreover, Chinese people’s belief in Confucius is different from the worship in God. The reason why people respect him is just because he creates the most sublime thought for humans under the revelation of Heaven. Compared with religions in the West, Confucianism is the reproduction of human happiness and peace and is the best philosophy compatible with human reason.

Confucius emphasizes that people should show their respect for “Heaven”, and proposes the thought of “fear of destiny” (Confucius, 1989). Destiny is also referred to as fate. Confucianism advocates that the birth and death, weal and woe, poverty and affluence are all fated. “Heaven” here does not refer to the Personality God who speaks out all his wills, but the force which can make four seasons change and all living things grow. Therefore, the “Mandate of Heaven” proposed by Confucius is no more the wills of Supreme Personality God worshiped by people in Shang Dynasty, but an object that can be understood by concentrating one’s efforts.

Consequently, the “Mandate of Heaven” refers to a sort of irresistible and unchangeable natural force with certain mystique, and draws a clear distinction from all that is humanly possible. Once “Heaven” refers to the sky, it rarely appears in our daily life. Here, Confucius considers the operation of Heaven as law of nature that can be followed, which represents his rationalism. He points out that Heaven cannot speak, which implies that the human beings who can use language to express their thoughts are more distinguished than natural objects, and the dominance of Heaven over the humans is limited (Confucius, 1989).

Confucius remolds the connotation of personality of “Heaven” to grant it with the features that surpass the Personality God are to create continually and to eternally create the lives from the perspective of human beings (Confucius, 1989), which is much similar to Voltaire’s deism. In Dictionary of Philosophy, Voltaire makes clear his ideal religion. A religion teaches humans to worship God, justice, benevolence and humanity, which is also his view of natural religion. It contains two important principles: respect God and practice virtue. He believes that there exist a sovereign entity between earth and Heaven, and does not resort to God until he encounters difficulties or cannot explain the complicated phenomena. However, a passive and indifferent God does not conform to his positive attitude towards life.

All in all, Voltaire’s God is a rational Supreme God, which exists for the needs of logical reasoning and social reality, and is totally different from that peremptory and blind supreme ruler in Western religion. On the contrary, it is very close to Confucian concept of natural law. He also thinks that Chinese Confucianism established by Confucius makes ordinary people own the purest cognition towards God, and instruct people by virtue. He proves that humans have a nature, which is essentially good, so to act according to one’s nature is called law, and to practice virtue according to its principles is called instruction. People should be instructed to act according to his/her nature and practice virtue according to its principles. Voltaire expresses his aspiration and pursuit towards the rational or natural religion through heartfelt praise of Chinese Confucianism which considers rationality, nature and being good as law.

It is for this reason that Confucian culture is mingled with Enlightenment and Voltaire goes for the pursuit of Chinese spirit. In essence, Voltaire’s deism takes the emancipation of humanity and this-worldly happiness as the ultimate objective. So except admitting a rational

supreme god, he refuses any metaphysical speculation which is not related to human world and any religious doctrine or teaching which treads on the humanity. It is this kind of realistic pursuit of displaying humanity and objecting to theocracy that makes Voltaire admire Confucius heart and soul and speak highly of the purity and sublimity of Chinese religion, which consequently enriches his view of the natural religion that is full of humanity and breaks away from superstition and prejudice. With the publication of works written by Voltaire, the view of deism publicly comes out in France, which has been already disconnected with theology and becomes a loose formulae. It survives because of its function of safeguarding maintaining politics and moral principles and defending against the attack of atheism. The deism provides a means to harmonize the needs of religion and reason from the society. These fruits cannot be achieved without the “view of destiny” proposed by Confucius.

### ***Confucius and Confucianism’s “Rationalism” Corresponding to Voltaire’s “Enlightenment Thoughts”***

Under the entry of “China” in Encyclopedia, Diderot introduces Chinese culture represented by Confucius and Confucian thought from the Spring and Autumn Period to Ming Dynasty and draws a conclusion that the basic concept during that period is “rationality”. He particularly speaks highly of only by means of rationality or truth to manage state affairs and administer a country. Consequently, the Enlightenment scholars represented by Voltaire all utilize “Confucius and his Confucian thought” as a weapon to attack and criticize the religion system and feudal system in days to come (Eno, 1989). Through adoption of Confucius and his Confucian thought and inspired by Chinese ancient cultivation, they object to the badness of Western feudal system through Chinese ancient civilization. Especially the “rationality” concept advocated by Enlightenment thinkers, greatly coincides with the ethics of the concept of natural law that expounds the concept man is an integral part of nature and takes “Heaven” as its core, as well as the “rationality” which is regarded as the highest and permanent principle and rule in the universe.

Confucius is one of the philosophers admired by Voltaire, and his thought exerts a great influence on Voltaire, especially his rationalism. First of all, Confucius once said he who wants to establish himself helps others establish themselves, and don’t do others what you don’t want others to do to you. We can see that he prefers to be benevolent in manner of considering others in his own place. But this must base on two conditions, one is similarity of humanity which makes it possible for one’s desire to be the same as others’ desire, and the other is that things common to human nature must be judged by rationality so as to guarantee that those who establish themselves” or “help others establish themselves are all the benevolent.

As an integral cultural structure, Confucianism is distinctly characteristic of tending to be practical reason, which is used by En-lighteners to draw Confucian culture. The so-called practical reason mainly refers to a sort of rational spirit, i.e. to interpret and treat things and tradition by means of a kind of rational or reasonable attitude, to guide, satisfy and abstain from lust by means of reason, as well as one’s or other’s nihilism and egoism, and to maintain certain balance in the pursuit of humanity and personality. One who has rational spirit refuse to follow God’s order, to blindly obey non-rational authority, to detest and reject the world, and to disgrace himself; instead, he returns good for evil, and measures and deals with all things by reason.

The practical reason is without doubt greatly attractive to Voltaire. The Confucian culture, such constructed, has relatively independent personality once it comes into being, and keeps a certain form structure stable and possesses comparatively independent function and effect which can be adapted to all kinds of different class contents. Therefore, it is

possible for the Confucian culture awareness branded with Chinese gentile aristocracy to be assimilated and used by French Bourgeois En-lighteners in 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The mainstream of Confucianism is rationalism. As an En-lightener, Voltaire explores every domain of human social activities with his own wisdom and questions all existent social and ideological rules and systems in history and in reality with his own reason. Voltaire's religious tolerance and Confucius' doctrine of benevolence both represent in source. That is what they share in common. Voltaire's thought appears with the development of capitalism and modern natural science. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are times when European capitalists sing the song of victory and also the times of reason. At first, Voltaire and his colleagues start with cognition field and claim that reason is the standard of knowledge instead of religious revelation or authority or human will and emotion. They put the rationalism into each aspect of social and political fields and make it into the banner of times. So reason functions as a theoretical weapon in the fight against autocracy and obscurantism.

They hold high the banner of rationalism and use it to fight against the superstition of Middle Ages and criticize or measure everything; they adopt the reason as the standard of all the others. In their view, human beings are born to be free. The so-called freedom is the ability to make decisions based on one's own reason and stems from demands of reason, so everyone should behave according to his own reason. To respect everyone is to their rational freedom, they optimistically believe human can know the inevitability of the world by reason, and science plays a key role in promoting social progress, strengthen human happiness and finally making the state into a "rational state", and the society into a "rational society". The reason here is not simply considered as a phase of human cognition or an aspect of thinking, but the basis of knowledge, of morals, of all human rights, and the criteria of judging things, so it becomes the basis of value.

It is also a sort of human philosophy and worldly ideal because it considers reason as human nature and believes that the most beautiful life is lived by following reason. Voltaire advocates reasonable enjoyment while is against carnality and asceticism. If human beings can behave based on their own reason, it will be freedom; if they can lead a life of reasonable pleasure, it will be happiness. Finally, Voltaire's rationalism is also a sort of cultural tradition, which advocates reason, science, logical thinking and the power of knowledge. As a very important content in the West, cultural tradition, still continues up to now despite the impact of new trends.

### ***Confucianism's "Benevolence" Corresponding to Voltaire's "Religious Tolerance"***

The most prominent cultural feature in Confucianism is its religious tolerance. The Confucian scholars in China (including ruling class) worship a unique God, namely, the Heaven. In addition to Confucianism, common people in China are allowed to profess other religions such as Taoism, Buddhism, etc. (Graham, A.C., 1989). Here Voltaire adopts Confucius and his Confucian thoughts to attack and criticize the power rule among European religions. The religions professed by Chinese emperor and officials are never blemished by the hypocrisy, nor interfered by quarrels between politics and religions and smeared by the reformist. However, the reformists in the West often attack each other by equally absurd arguments when their fanatic disciples are incited to fight against each other. Therefore, Chinese are much better than any other nation especially in this aspect.

Voltaire realizes the importance of Confucian thought in Chinese society and deems that the Confucian thought is the basis of political rule in China. He holds that the source from which so good systems stem in China is the moral principles made by Confucius, which is combined into one with Chinese laws. The Confucian moral principles advocate that people

should adopt the methods used to manage the family to administer the country because the whole country is just like a big family and the emperor rules over the country just like the patriarch, so people should respect the emperor just as they treat with their fathers. Therefore, the patriarchy closely connects the whole empire. In addition, the Confucianism integrates into Chinese customs, laws and etiquette, which is widely accepted by common people. They use these moral criteria to restrain their own behaviors and improve their moral cultivation. Confucian moral thoughts, in Voltaire's view, make Chinese society tolerant and harmonious, and make Chinese empire prosperous for thousands of years.

In the religious view cherished by Voltaire, the most important principle is the moral principles. In terms of the doctrine of benevolence, the thinkers in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe call themselves the beginner. As we know, the core of Confucianism is "benevolence", which is the highest principle advocated by Confucian. It is thus seen that "benevolence" is the sum of interpersonal relations. When Voltaire and other European thinkers look for a sort of moral principles which can improve social progress and human happiness at the turning point of transition from dialogues between human and God to interpersonal dialogues, they cannot help praising the profundity of the benevolence theory of Confucius, and exclaim that "none of morals is left out in his dialogues and all are concerned with human happiness". Many dialogues as regards Confucian ethics are quoted by Voltaire, including all important moral standards he learns in the translation of Confucian works, among which the most frequently quoted and commented that he wants to establish himself helps others establish themselves. However, many research papers at home claim that Voltaire speaks much highly of "don't do to others what you don't want others to do to you."

Voltaire attaches importance to the significance of morals towards the society. He thinks to himself "What is virtue? It is to 'be good to others'" when he discusses the virtue. Such moral principles advocate the awakening of human self-consciousness and the establishment of interpersonal relations of mutual assistance based on equality. In order to show the importance of setting up harmonious interpersonal relations, Voltaire frequently quotes another dialogue saying justice in return for injustice and return good for good. He believes that Confucian ethics which are very beneficial to the human society appear much nobler for their tolerance. It seems that the reason why Voltaire advocates the Confucian thoughts is to wake up his compatriots whose beliefs are twisted because of religious disputes. It cannot be said that the ideal of cosmopolitanism cherished by Voltaire is rooted from Confucius, but it is definite that it is nurtured, enriched or even inspired to be more vigorous and attractive by Confucian thought. However, the world of universal harmony Voltaire aspires is by no means a world where people can enjoy real equality. Although he advocates respect for human rights and demands freedom, he still represents the profits of capitalists throughout within confines of times and class.

The core of Confucian thoughts is "benevolence", whose basic connotation is "to love others". What Voltaire pursues unremittingly all his life is exactly this humanism which considers human as human who can establish harmonious interpersonal relations. It is common love for others that leads Voltaire to enter Confucian castle and make him modestly call himself "Confucian disciple". From 1738 when Voltaire began to study China for writing *Outlines* to his death in 1778, Voltaire never changes his admiration for China. Once losing his heart, he will never change until death. The reason why this sincere love for China is enduring is because his complete identification with Confucian benevolence.

## CONCLUSION

Voltaire advocates the policy of benevolence and rule of virtue of the Chinese government, aiming to overthrow the autocracy of the French government. Louis XIV rules the country the longest and promotes the autocracy to an unprecedented stage. Voltaire holds

that wise and tolerant Chinese emperors, rational law and the perfect administrative system can't do without Confucian ethics and morality, which integrates the whole empire together and constitutes the foundation of the country's harmony. This huge empire builds its law and peace on this natural and sacred principle, i.e., younger generation should respect their elders in the way that they respect the Master of ethics such as Confucius. Voltaire admires Confucius so much that he regards him as Jesus or Socrates.

In the enlightened monarchy advocated by Voltaire, there is no privileged class, except the emperor who has absolute power. He hopes to promote the freedom of religion belief with the help of authority of monarchs. In the political system of China, all men are equal except the emperor, and they also have a chance of stepping into the ruling class through the imperial competitive examination. The official position and privileged class cannot be inherited. This creates opportunity for those intellectuals and the third estate to take part in politics or the government. In China, there is no privileged class, and everyone has the right to take part in politics or the government. That's one of the reasons why Voltaire speaks highly of China's political system.

From here we can see that Voltaire regards Chinese government as the ideal one and uses traditional morality and ethics of China to criticize French autocratic monarchy system, exerting great influence at that time. The Roman Catholic Church is not only the spiritual pillar of French autocracy, but also a feudal lord who has great political power. Monks and priests use the organizations and economic power of the religion to poison people's mind, rob their fortune, protect the system of exploitation, and maintain their dissolute and dissipated life. They set so-called charity organizations and schools to control people's mind. They spread the Divine Right and the absolute truth, theology, and didn't allow any thoughts to change the existing order. They also establish religious court and inquisition to persecute heretics, atheists, and the liberals brutally. Voltaire holds that the feudal society is the archenemy of the ideological liberation movement. In this aspect, he also uses traditional morality and ethics of China as the weapon to expose and criticize them.

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