

‘A Special Zone for Confucianism’? Theses of the Academician Zhang Xianglong on Traditional Chinese Culture

Monika GÄNßBAUER*

Abstract

This article introduces the work of the academician Zhang Xianglong (b. 1949), focussing on his idea of establishing a “special zone for Confucianism” in China. Zhang argues that special protection is needed for Confucian traditions which he perceives as the leading culture of China. Confucian culture should find its way out of the museum, says Zhang. He also refers to the political concept of “one country, two systems” that was implemented when Hongkong was restored to Chinese rule. Zhang applies this to his idea of a “special zone for Confucianism”, suggesting that this political concept could be extended to “one country, three systems”. In my view Zhang is developing new, creative ideas for possible experimental fields dealing with Confucianism in the context of the People’s Republic of China. In the end it is my argument that it would be helpful to conduct in-depth research on the possible role of Confucianism in today’s China.

Keywords: Confucianism, Zhang Xianglong, special zone

Izveček

Ta članek predstavlja delo akademika Zhang Xianglong (r. 1949) in se osredotoča na njegovo idejo o ustanovitvi »posebne cone za konfucianizma« na Kitajskem. Zhang trdi, da je potrebna posebna zaščita za konfucijansko tradicijo, za katero meni, da je vodilna kultura Kitajske. Konfucijska kultura bi po njegovem morala najti svojo pot iz muzeja. Sklicuje se tudi na politični koncept »ena država, dva sistema«, ki se je izvajal, ko je bila obnovljena kitajska nadvlada Hongkongu. Zhang to povezuje s svojo idejo o »posebni coni za konfucianizem« in predlaga, da bi se ta politični koncept razširil na »ena država, trije sistemi«. Po mojem mnenju Zhang razvija nove, ustvarjalne ideje za morebitna poskusna področja, ki se ukvarjajo s konfucianizmom v okviru Ljudske republike Kitajske. Tako je moj argument, da bi bilo koristno, da se naredi poglobljena raziskava o morebitni vlogi konfucianizma v današnji Kitajski.

Ključne besede: konfucianizem, Zhang Xianglong, posebna cona

* Monika GÄNßBAUER, Professor of Chinese Studies, University of Erlangen, Germany.
m.gaenssbauer@gmx.net

Introductory Remarks

Zhang Xianglong 張祥龍 was born in 1949 in Hongkong. Later he moved to Beijing together with his parents. He studied philosophy at Beijing University and obtained his M.A. and PhD degrees at the Universities of Toledo and Buffalo in America. He taught for some years at Beijing University. Currently, he is a professor at the University of Shandong. His main areas of research are comparative philosophy of East and West and the philosophy of Heidegger.

Zhang Xianglong belongs to a group of contemporary Chinese academics who concern themselves as scholars with the topic of Confucianism and Confucianism's possible role in today's China. He and his work have not been mentioned yet in the reviews of contemporary Chinese scholarship in these areas, e.g. published some years ago by John Makeham (Makeham 2008) and Daniel Bell (Bell 2008). In my view, though, he is an interesting figure developing new, creative ideas for possible experimental fields in dealing with Confucianism under the circumstances of today's China.

Zhang Xianglong and the Contemporary Confucian Discourse

Unlike his contemporary Jiang Qing 蔣庆 (b. 1953), the founder of a Confucian academy in Guizhou province who taught at the Southwest University of Political Science and Law and the Shenzhen College of Administration, Zhang Xianglong is not proposing Confucianism as the only possible solution for all of mankind's problems. In his book *A Confucian Constitutional Order* Jiang Qing claims:

The [Confucian] Way of humane Authority [...] has brought together the values of monarchy and of theocratic forms of rulership from ancient times, the democracy of the modern era, and contemporary ecology. It can also help Western countries to draw on historical-cultural legitimacy for their political development. (Jiang 2013, 39)

Zhang Xianglong's works do not display a missionary impetus. His reflections are centered on the situation of Chinese society and the state of traditional philosophy in China today. The political Confucianism doesn't have the character of universalism for him (Zhang 2011, 232). This is also a point that Zhang criticizes in Jiang's theory. Zhang Xianglong is not of the opinion that Confucianism could or should be universalized as a model of "global politics". Furthermore,

Confucianism should resist being reduced to a university discipline or implemented as an institutionalized religion (Billioud and Thoraval 2008, 99).

Confucianism should be non-utilitarian, argues Zhang. People should not worship high technology as a source of economic power and should not blindly believe in science and technology. Instead, technological power should be critically examined from a cultural standpoint. Otherwise people in China would be “converted to universalism and lose the cultural legitimacy that Jiang Qing speaks of”. (Zhang 2011, 236) Here Zhang is openly critical of a position taken by China’s mainstream society. The sinologist Thomas Fröhlich has identified an unbroken, optimistic belief in technical feasibility in today’s China. Modernity is not perceived by most Chinese as a contingent process. In contrast to Europe, where the idea of progress has been the object of several almost fatally telling critiques, many people in China are still convinced that scientific-technological progress is operable and controllable (Fröhlich 2011).

In Zhang Xianglong’s view, true Confucians, or “Ru scholars” (*ruzhe* 儒者), do see the Ru teachings as the ultimate truth and they hope that these teachings find more and more followers. But they do not long for material gain and profit. Their aspiration extends no further than that the Ru teachings become more and more widely known. And they see it as their responsibility to criticize inhumane and unnatural tendencies in modern life.

A Special Zone for Confucianism?

In my paper I focus only on a small slice of Zhang’s oeuvre, namely, his idea of a special zone for Confucianism in China. My approach is a sinological one, and I will try to contextualize the theses of Zhang Xianglong in the current Chinese society and the field of studies on Confucianism.

As Rošker and Von Senger have remarked Chinese approaches to the exploration of their own tradition are often quite different from research interests, methods and interpretations of academics coming from a European or American background (Rošker 2005, 191; Von Senger 2008). I agree with them that it is challenging but necessary to establish creative dialogues and to deal with those Chinese explorations in a respectful manner which also means to take them seriously. This is where I see the purported significance of this article.

Zhang Xianglong’s idea of a special zone for Confucianism in China was

formed after he graduated from Beijing University. In an interview conducted by students of Beijing University, Zhang told them that immediately after his graduation he wanted to live the secluded life of a Daoist in the mountains. But the forestry authorities did not allow him to do so. Later he obtained a post in a nature reserve but was assigned mainly to paperwork there (Chen and Zhou n.y.)

In an article entitled "Provide a Shelter for China's Ancient and Endangered Culture—A Proposal to Established a Special Zone for Confucianism" Zhang argues that, just as this nowadays special protection is needed for endangered species of plants and animals, so too does this apply to Confucian traditions, which Zhang refers to as the most valuable among Chinese traditions and the leading culture of China (Zhang 2006). Statements like this could easily be seen as part of the widespread trend towards Han nationalism in the People's Republic of China, a trend which perceives Han Chinese traditions as more advanced and civilized than that of the minorities in China (Gladney 2009).

As Zhang sees it, the Confucian traditions have failed, and continue to fail, in countering waves of Westernization with alternative measures. Unlike Buddhist and Daoist traditions in China, which succeeded in building their own Noah's Ark and in finding refuge in temples and religious communities, Confucianism in China has to be saved by special rescue measures. "Confucius Temples" should be revived and Confucian culture should find its way out of the museum. Besides using the concept of a "nature reserve for Confucian culture", Zhang also refers to existing communities such as the Amish people in the United States who are closely following their own community rules, rules often deviating from those of the mainstream society surrounding them (Zhang 2006). Zhang Xianglong also compares Confucianism with the aboriginal culture of the Indians. In 2009 he taught in Latin America and got into contact with Indian communities there. In his view, Indian and Chinese communities are facing the same task: to recover the centerpiece of their culture (Zhang 2010). Zhang's arguments are part of a discourse of self-assertion within modern Confucianism. This discourse took shape, Michael Lackner argues, as a response to a challenge, i.e. it is an emotive reaction to a perceived threat to Chinese identity (Lackner 2003, 275). This kind of discourse gives rise to its own challenge by defending a purported identity against purported alien forces.

As regards the Chinese context, Zhang Xianglong refers to the political concept of "one country, two systems" that was implemented when Hongkong was

restored to Chinese rule. Zhang applies this to his idea of a “reserve for Confucian culture”, suggesting that this political concept could be extended to “one country, three systems”. To me, this idea, through its extension of existing political and societal concepts, seems to be a very meaningful step towards pluralization. One is not only reminded of strategies for the handover of Hongkong but also of the process of establishing Special Economic Zones since the 1980s, which functioned as experimental areas and pilot projects documenting the growing capacity for innovation in China (Heilmann 2009).

In Zhang’s view it is the responsibility of the government and of academics in China to revitalize Confucianism (Zhang 2010). Confucianism should resist being reduced to a university discipline or an institutionalized religion. The Western powers that invaded China during the 19th century are obliged to acknowledge their guilt and to shoulder responsibility for their misdeeds. Similarly the author Lao She (1899–1966) whose family suffered deeply during the violent repression of the Boxer uprising carried out by the Joint Army of Western forces once wrote: “This question of guilt can never be completely settled.” (Lao 1993, 296) Christianity which is a truly ecumenical and universal religion was not successful in China, says Zhang, because it did not respect the vital structure of Confucianism. Seligman and Weller also see Christianity as “the most obvious example of a set of ideas meant to be equally true for all times, places, and peoples.” Still their conclusion is that

while never as successful in China as in some other parts of the world, it [Christianity] has had a significant impact both through direct conversions [...] and by leading other groups to emulate some of its techniques. (Seligman and Weller 2012, 143)

Even today, China is still, according to Zhang, confronted with cultural invasions by universalist theories and ideas. Education and the academic world in China seem to be quite westernized (Zhang 2007, 7) and Zhang’s hope is that Confucianism can help change these ossified ways of thinking. With this opinion Zhang does not stand alone. Quite a few Chinese academics have been criticizing, over the last few years, the dominance of scientific concepts derived from a discourse among scholars with European and American backgrounds. This has been the case, for example, in the area of religious studies (Fudan 2009; Wang 2008). As an alternative to this, Chinese scholars are striving to further develop indigenous Chinese concepts.

Returning now to Zhang's idea of establishing a Confucian "special zone", Billoud and Thoraval restate this matter in the following terms:

If the genius of Confucianism can only flourish within daily life, within an organic space that includes the ensembles of its arts and rituals inherited from the past, is it not tempting to imagine the possibility of re-establishing such a space within the modern world? (Billoud and Thoraval 2008, 99)

A few of Zhang's texts contain a somewhat closer description of his own conception of such a "special zone". It could be an area of about 100 square kilometers, says Zhang. Modern technology would not be needed within such a reserve. Traditional ways of living would be revitalized. The community would take joint decisions on matters of common interest. The mode of government would neither be individualistic nor autocratic. Farmers should form a considerable part of the inhabitants, green agriculture and technology should be applied. Officials would be selected through competitive exams and there should be a strict selection of the future inhabitants of a Confucian special zone (Zhang 2007). People would live peacefully together and apply traditional Chinese techniques, such as Chinese medicine. In another text, Zhang proposes the revival of Confucian rituals, such as wedding ceremonies (Zhang n.y.).

In reading these texts one cannot help to be reminded of traditional ideas of ideal communities developed for example in the works of the Confucian philosopher Mencius 孟子 (370–290 BCE). In one of the chapters Mencius gets involved in a conversation with King Hui of Liang. Mencius gives advice that if a state does not interfere with the people during the growing season, there will be more grain than the people can eat. And if the King would allow axes to be used in the woods only in proper season, there would be more lumber than the people can use. According to Wolfgang Bauer, Mencius has developed the first social utopia in China (Bauer 1971, 42). Another Chinese philosopher, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), was of the opinion that the mechanized cities are the characteristic form of existence in Western civilizations whereas life in the countryside is much more in accordance with the essence of Chinese culture. He himself laid down his position as a teacher and founded a rural cooperative in Shandong which became an example for self-governing and social reform (Bauer 1971, 497).

But still one gains the impression that Zhang's descriptions of a Confucian Reserve remain quite peripheral. For me, this problem also arises with regard to

the idea propounded by Kang Xiaoguang (b. 1963) from Renmin University in Beijing, who pleads for the establishment of Confucian religion (*rujiao* 儒教) in today's China but neglects to provide any concrete blueprint for the implementation of this idea (Gaenssbauer 2009).

Zhang Xianglong has also organized a petition to erect a statue of Confucius on the Campus of Beijing University. The culture of Beijing University is characterized by tolerance, says Zhang (Zhang 2008). The University, however, should not only show tolerance for Western culture but for Chinese culture as well. One of Zhang's texts is even entitled: “Wu Kongzi zhi Beida wu linghun – Beida Xiaoyuan li Kongzi xiang de jianyi 无孔子之北大无灵魂——北大校园立孔子像的建议” (Without Confucius Beijing University is Without a Soul). The title of this article recalls a book written by the sinologist Richard Wilhelm in the year 1926: *The Soul of China* (Wilhelm 2007). This intervention of Zhang's contains a clear critical allusion to the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement which had its inception at Beijing University and wanted to do away with such Chinese traditions as Confucianism (Chow et al. 2008).

In an article on the “crisis of Chinese traditional culture” Zhang Xianglong restates still more emphatically his view that a culture has a soul (Zhang 2003). His crisis analysis is grounded in the following questions:

Are there still transmitters of traditional Chinese culture?

Do the societal structures that have hitherto borne this traditional culture still exist?

Are people nowadays still influenced in their decision-making process by the values of this traditional culture?

Does the language of this culture still find expression in the thoughts and feelings of people today?

Confucius' birthday is not an official holiday in China. This means, so Zhang argues, that Confucianism is marginalized and that the government does not sufficiently value traditional culture. The acute crisis-awareness of Zhang Xianglong even leads him to make the following statement: “The waters of the Huanghe are the blood that flows through the veins of the Chinese nation.” Zhang Xianglong's understanding of the state seems to display similarities here to that of

the Chinese philosopher Zhang Junmai 张君勱 (1886–1969) who, according to Thomas Fröhlich, perceived the state as an organism with its own will and self-awareness and, as it were, a mind of its own (Fröhlich 2000, 171).

Critique and Conclusion

Of course Zhang Xianglong's theses have also met with criticism in China and Taiwan. Shang Xinjian 尚新建 (b. 1953) from Beijing University has commented that the cultural elements in such a "special zone for Confucianism" would not be real and alive (Hong 2001). In his view, the vitality of a culture can only show forth and prove itself in day-to-day life. Another argument of Shang's is that Confucian culture in China was historically closely connected with a "feudal dictatorial system". Shang poses the question: "Should such a system also be implemented in the special zone for Confucianism?" Shang's remarks mirror a trend in the People's Republic of China where, as Jana Rošker remarks, "classical Confucian philosophers have [...], mildly speaking, 'fallen into disgrace' as representatives of suppressing [...] 'feudal ideologies.'" (Rošker 2005, 199)

Wang Huaiyu 王懷聿 from Georgia State University asks himself, in a book review on Zhang's work *Refuge of Thinking*:

How can "the preservation of a set of ancient customs and morals [...] be in accord with the Confucian spirit of 'proceeding with time' [...] Must a holding on to the archaic forms of rituals and institutions not constitute rather a direct contravention of the genuine Confucian spirit, which is supposed to constantly explore and expand its meanings in the ever-changing world?" (Wang 2008)

Dang Guoying 党国英 (b. 1957), researcher at the Department for Rural Development in China, Academy for Social Sciences in Beijing, is even sharper in his critique of Zhang's idea (Dang 2010). He emphatically rejects Zhang's proposal for the state-supported establishment of a "special zone for Confucianism" in China. As long as the problem of poverty exists in China, says Dang, he feels bound to strongly resist the idea of government subsidy for such an idea as Zhang's. He also opposes Zhang's perception of a wide gap between the cultures of "East" and "West". In his view, the assumption of the existence of an "Eastern, Confucian culture" is contrived and highly overestimated.

Gong Pengcheng 龔鵬程 from Taipei, (b. 1956), author and president of

Foguang University, has dealt with the topic of revitalizing Confucianism from a still broader perspective (Gong 2010).

It is not possible to revive Confucianism without adding some new elements to it, argues Gong. He recommends a sober and calm discussion. Confucianism's revitalization is only a recent phenomenon but there is already a heated debate going on about what should be accomplished through this revitalization. Gong points to the dangers which this debate brings with it: sloganeering, dogmatism and reducing Confucianism to “fast food”. He compares the current situation to consuming chocolate or ice cream: If it is sweet and tasty you eat it. But this is not the real taste. Or, to abandon the metaphor, he proposes that more profound research should be conducted on the actual value of such a revitalization of Confucianism and on its possible effects upon society. Currently, many institutions in mainland China invite academics to give talks on Confucianism. But these institutions take a very utilitarian approach to this activity, Gong Pengcheng argues. They require of the invited academics that they talk about the usefulness of Confucianism for management measures, or for gaining profits.

Furthermore, it is not easy to apply Confucianism to today's society because of the tremendous changes that Chinese society has undergone. Pre-modern China was an agrarian society. Now, China has transformed itself into an industrialized, commercial society. This change also brought with it a change in the realm of ethics. Family structures in pre-modern and modern China differ enormously from one another. And Confucianism would have to cope with these changes.

It is nowhere near sufficient merely to discuss Confucianism, or to read some classical books, says Gong. At the moment, taking part in the discourse on the revitalization of Confucianism seems to be very much in vogue. But, as we all know, fashions are short-lived. Gong's conclusion, with which I can only agree, is: it would be helpful to conduct in-depth research on the possible role of Confucianism in today's China.

The government of the People's Republic of China, in an effort to lend legitimacy to its rule, has been propagating for some years a movement of cultural renaissance, which aims to instil national pride in “5000 years”, as it is claimed, “of Chinese culture” among the general populace. There is, however, a continued refusal on the part of those in power to allow the reestablishment of institutions with Confucian character. I regard Zhang Xianglong's proposals as creative and

probably promising with regard to their potential of actually being realised since they skillfully blend in with the successfully tried strategies by the Chinese government: the establishment of special zones and the concept of one country, two systems. In view of the existing political and social conditions Zhangs proposal may represent a possible course of action in order to revive Confucianism in the People's Republic of China.

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