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A Lutheran Perspective on Righteousness in China

Futao (Gary) Liu

The recent history of China cannot get away from the impact of western thoughts and industrialization, including Democracy, Marxism, Republicanism, etc. For two millenium or so, the Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551–479 BCE), had dominated Chinese society through his philosophy (commonly called Confucianism) in every respect, from the hierarchical structures of governments and states to familial relations. Confucianism met its real challenge only in the recent history of China. At the collapsing edge of the last feudal society (the Qing Dynasty which fell in 1911), patriotic Confucians had tried to bring what is useful of the West into traditional values and the moral milieu of China in order to save or even renew the historically dominating Confucianism they cherished so much. The total collapse of Confucianism finally happened due to the Cultural Revolution that was carried out by Chairman Mao in the 1960s to destroy everything that was from the past and revolutionize Chinese culture with the materialistic and communistic ideology. However, the direction has been shifted dramatically in favor of the ancient philosophy, Confucianism, in recent years, as the Chinese government is determined to resist the influence of the West. Neo-Confucian scholars have tried to restore Confucianism alongside the Communist government, hoping that they could use it to resist the ideological and religious invasion or penetration of the West and restore the moral order of the society. Regardless, their efforts are not as successful as expected, largely because Chinese society has already been highly-westernized and technologized.

In 2012, Fang Zhaohui, a historical scholar in Tsinghua University (one of the two top schools in China, observed that “when ‘gain/benefit’¹ is elevated to the primary status over ‘righteousness,’ all orders will be interrupted, and a tendency that weighs everything based on monetary values will be cultivated so that the heart of people becomes rotten, and the order of society collapses.”² For Confucius, righteousness is one of the five virtues that a gentleman or whole man practices in fulfillment of his social responsibilities.³ In other words, Fang is saying that with-

out a moral system restraining the ever-growing greed, a capitalistic society loses its internal order and faces its inevitable destruction. This is the reality of China even now ten years later. A dominant supposition held by Chinese scholars is that the reason why profit-oriented capitalism works in the West is the religious background lying behind the profit-oriented culture and individualism, which somehow restrains the wild expansion of covetousness. In opposition to the imbalance that capitalism has wrought in China, the restoration of Confucianism that views righteousness and gain holistically is supposed to be the answer for Chinese neo-Confucians and government policy-makers. However, reality does not permit this illusion to move forward into any tangible realization.

Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, as they have been in the past centuries and today as well, do not acknowledge a personal God or any god who has his or her will to intervene in human history. Instead, the highest moral judge of Confucianism is an impersonal Heaven. Stephen Oliver observes in his PhD dissertation, “Zhongyong’s metanarrative is that of Confucian cosmology and ultimate goals, which looks forward to the human moral effort to bring about harmony between Heaven, humans and all things ... In Zhongyong, Heaven is ... an impersonal entity.”⁴ Furthermore, Oliver observes, “Zhongyong starts with a reverence for Heaven. Then, because it is from Heaven, a person is to revere one’s own moral nature.”⁵ For Confucius, the constitution of man or a whole person lies in a bal-



anced view or righteousness-prioritized moral life, apart from any relation with a supreme judge or deity who can personally intervene in the presence. “But what is the necessity for a complete man of the present day to have all these things? The man, who in the view of gain, thinks of righteousness; who in the view of danger is prepared to give up his life; and who does not forget an old agreement however far back it extends—such a man may be reckoned a complete man [note: whole person],”⁶ says the Master, Confucius.

Righteousness from a Lutheran Perspective

The Lutheran Confessions are able to address the debates about China's future because they speak to the nature of righteousness and the personhood of God. Because Confucianism uses these same categories but has different judgements about them, the Confessions are a suitable conversation partner to speak to China's future. Luther's Small Catechism offers a thorough explanation in terms of the personhood of God in the first article of the Apostle's Creed,

God has created me ... and given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears ... ; reason and all mental faculties ... God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing ... and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life ... All this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”⁷

This very personal God creates us and sustains us; thus, all the necessities and nourishment which constitute the concept of “gain/benefit/profit” in Confucianism are a divine gift out of the fatherly love from God. The very essence of our physical needs does not depend on our striving to take whatever is needed or desired from nature or the so-called “Heaven.” It lies only in the divine bestowing of the personal God who creates and provides out of “divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!” On the contrary, because of the non-personhood credited to the highest subject of the cosmos in Confucianism, the reverence called forth by Confucius toward Heaven ultimately is the self-referential moral nature of human beings.⁸ Thus, what constitutes a whole man is the dualistic combination of physical and social needs, i.e., gain and righteousness for which there is an inherent and insurmountable conflict of interest. A person’s gain inevitably hinders the extension of his or her righteousness to neighbors in social and communal relationships. For instance, a businessman is thought to be inevitably unrighteous since his gain is accumulated by the sacrifice of his duties of fulfilling the virtues of a whole man, among which there is the virtue of righteousness.

However, summarized in his Small Catechism, Luther offers a harmonization instead of a conflict. There is the vertical definition of both gain and righteousness through the lens of God’s personal creation and providence as the ultimate source of all things. Gain is the reception from the divine gift of God in physical needs, while righteousness is another reception of God’s sacrificial gifting through Jesus Christ on behalf of our unrighteousness and need for forgiveness. And this reception of righteousness is included in the first article as well, according to Luther, which is part of “reason and all mental faculties [that meet] all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.”⁹ Gain and righteousness merge in the divine source of eternal life as gifts for all creatures, including human beings. There is no conflict of interest at all from this divine perspective. In other words, Christianity offers the Chinese a drastically different view of gain and righteousness that make the constitution of a whole man dependent upon God, who has always been gracious toward His creatures since creation. On the contrary, Confucianism defines a whole man through his balanced practices of economic activities and communal relationship. According to Confucianism, there are not many gentlemen or whole men who can strive a balance between these two conflicted categories in reality. That is not

the case with Christianity and its definition of gain and righteousness. For Christians (especially Lutherans), the foundation of a whole man lies in the reception of the divine gift with the thankful recognition of it in order to fulfill neighborly needs and communal love.

Melanchthon articulates the two kinds of righteousness, in which one is the “civil righteousness that reason understands,”¹⁰ in contrast to the other righteousness, which is of God. The civil righteousness, apart from the righteousness of God, is identical to the Confucian righteousness, so to speak, since it is primarily involved in community life. To be fair to Confucians, this civil righteousness has its worth. Melanchthon says, “And to a certain extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own powers ... Moreover, we willingly give this righteousness of reason the praises it deserves, for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this ... God even honors it with temporal rewards.”¹¹ But this temporal or civil righteousness that both Christians and non-Christians can do, does not constitute what a whole man/person is. Fundamentally, it is the righteousness of God alone that constitutes who or what a person is from the beginning of the world and still today, especially when dealing with evil things inside and outside ourselves. And this righteousness of God as the foundation of a whole man can only be received through faith, just as the profit or gain of the nourishment for life needs to be acknowledged by faith from the Christian perspective. According to Lutheran Confessions, this righteousness of God is also called the righteousness of faith simply because it is faith alone that receives this gift or promise of the delivery of the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ. Christian faith is to acknowledge the divine source and bestowing of the needed

手 + 戈 = 我 + 羊 = 義
hand lance me sheep righteousness

gain and righteousness which supposedly make a person whole by virtuous practices according to Confucianism. The difference lies in that there is already the righteousness being counted to Christians by faith, that is to say, simply acknowledging the offer of God apart from any practiced virtues, including the righteousness towards neighbors.

A Lutheran Perspective on Righteousness in China

Back to Fang’s observation and his proposal for the restoration of Confucianism: it is easy to point out that the future of Chinese individuals, regardless of how the society as a whole moves forward politically and ideologically, cannot depend on the civil righteousness alone, since it has proved powerless in front of social evils and personal failures in a Communist world mixed with Capitalistic theories and practices. For example, nowadays there is almost no respect for elderly people since they

are not economically productive any longer either for society as a whole or for their own children. Without a nationwide social security system to support elderly people to have an independent retired life, their dignity is greatly harmed when there is not any benevolence from their children to carry out the caring support. According to the Confucian virtues, it is obligatory and filial to support aging parents. That is one of the reasons why the Chinese government encourages Neo-confucians to revive an old-fashioned philosophy in a progressive Communist and Capitalistic society.

From the Christian perspective, the answer to the foundation of a whole person lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the righteousness that is ready to be credited to whoever believes in Him to become righteous in the eyes of God and men as well. This righteousness of God has proved powerful in forming tangible communities full of brotherly love and enduring societal evils and individual dark-nesses throughout the ages. As Christianity grows rapidly in China, there is a glim-mer of hope that the moral order of the great society will be restored to some extent by the witnessing power of the Holy Spirit, who works in all Christian believers.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in relation to the concept of righ-teousness in Chinese culture is the parameter of civil righteousness in light of the Christian faith. In very recent years, the Reformed churches in China seem to have strong opinions about getting involved in civil movements, i.e., being the leading voice in public against social evils. Among those Christian leaders who had been very vocal in public protests is Wangyi, a Reformed pastor who was sentenced to nine years in prison.¹² The theological rationale of Wangyi and his colleagues can be found in the Manila Manifesto of the Lausanne Movement. Affirmation 9 states, “We affirm that the proclamation of God’s kingdom of justice and peace demands the denunciation of all injustice and oppression, both personal and structural; we will not shrink from this prophetic witness.”¹³ Under section A: the Whole Gospel, they clarify that

The proclamation of God’s kingdom necessarily demands the pro-phetic denunciation of all that is incompatible with it. Among the evils we deplore are destructive violence, including institutionalized violence, political corruption, all forms of exploitation of people and of the earth, the undermining of the family, abortion on demand, the drug traffic, and the abuse of human rights.¹⁴

Where there is sufficient freedom of speech, such as in the U.S., the Manila Manifesto does not need to be discerned at all since Christians and church leaders can exercise this “prophetic witness” in the public space. A slight deviation outside the proper boundaries does not lead to legal consequences or sentences to prison, at least for now. However, the consequences for the Christian church in China can be

catastrophic as leaders are jailed, and sheep are chased around from city to city and town to town, where freedom of speech or religious practices are suppressed.

At the same time, the Confucian parameter of righteousness does not help in this situation either, since its advocacy for the practice of righteousness in the social realm for the sake of being a whole person, has been reflected among Christian leaders, who are well educated in the Chinese traditional literature, especially Confucianism. For example, The “Analects” records, “Tsze-lu [a disciple of Confucius] then said to the family, ‘Not to take office is not righteousness ... A superior man takes office, and performs the righteous duties belonging to it.’”¹⁵ According to Confucius, if a man or person is righteous and whole, i.e., being a superior man, he has to run for governmental offices (or to be vocal about social affairs in public) for the sake of the communal benefits, even though it might mean a sacrifice of his own life or his family. There is this kind of subconscious understanding of civil righteousness among some Christian leaders who are heavily involved in civil movements—it is a duty or divine call for the Christian Church to publicly denounce social evils as though the prophetic denouncement made by Israelite prophets in the OT period still applies to the NT church throughout the world regardless of the political circumstances. In other words, it would be sinning against God and His evangelical will when this prophetic office is not publicly carried out by the church. Now, the Lutheran Confessions can shed further light on this issue of the parameter of civil righteousness, whereby, properly speaking, leaders of the Christian church do not have the authority to lead the whole church into political and civil movements even though some of those movements do apply to individual Christians according to their duties related to their citizenship in this world and governmental offices properly carried by them.

Concerning the power or authority of bishops, the Augsburg Confessors publicly declare:

[12] For spiritual power has its command to preach the gospel ...
[13] It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs ... [29] Whatever other power and jurisdiction bishops have in various matters, such as marriage or tithes, they have them by virtue of human right [not by divine right which gives them only the office of Gospel].¹⁶

The proper parameter of righteousness' manifestation in the social realm for the Christian Church concerns only the Gospel, the dutiful administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of the Office of the Keys, not anything mandatory in

the political and earthly realm, even though church leaders and lay people do have their proper calls to fulfill as citizens, or rather as sojourners, in this civil realm or political world. It is permissible for the Christian church not to voice public protest against political issues and institutional evils, especially in places where Christianity is heavily restricted by the secular government. In fact, the patriotic three-self state church has practiced a legitimate position through their cooperative and non-critical attitude towards the Chinese government. Now, the compromise of Christian doctrines by the state church is a different issue that is worthy of serious discussion but not here. The Lutheran Confessions acknowledge that "...[O]ur people distinguish the offices of the two authorities and powers and direct that both be honored as the highest gifts of God on earth."¹⁷

Some Christians would ask this question: can we remain silent and respect the government even when it is not fulfilling this highest gift as the secular authority? The Lutheran Confessions and the practices of the Augsburg Confessors offer us a positive answer to it. With good conscience and standing before God, we can remain silent in the public realm and show our respect to the government that is doing evil things even against the Christian Church and her Gospel proclamation. The Augsburg confessors diligently showed their respect toward Emperor Charles V, who even threatened to militarily defeat the evangelical cause: "Most serene, most mighty, invincible Emperor, most gracious Lord. A short time ago, Your Imperial Majesty graciously summoned an imperial diet to convene here in Augsburg," acclaimed the confessors in 1530. Of course, there was the Schmalkaldic league under the subscription of the Smalcald Articles ready to counter back with military forces a few years later. However, the point I try to make here is that it is possible and necessary for Christians to be respectful towards persecuting secular authorities. Not only the reformers in the 16th century but also the early church fathers before Constantine, who made Christianity the legal religion, practiced this kind of piety in front of governmental leaders who did carry out some institutional evils.

While the withdraw into the private realm for righteous people makes them unrighteous according to Confucianism, Christians have freedom of conscience before God to withdraw themselves from the political and public realm or any civil movements that are critical against government policies and rules as long as they are not asked to denounce the Christian faith and the practice of loving neighbors in a micro-scale. Social movements and reformation efforts, properly speaking, do not belong to the Christian church since the kingdom of God is not here. The proper parameter of the manifestation of Christian righteousness lies in the good works according to the ten commandments and love toward neighbors. The practice of neighborly love, i.e., our righteousness that benefits friends and neighbors, can always be carried out on a micro-scale among families and church communities. Macro-scale social movements do not necessarily constitute the righteousness

God calls us to fulfill in our Christian callings. To clarify the definitions here, I will give an example in the pro-life and anti-abortion context. To help a friend, family member, or a stranger you encounter to make a choice of life instead of abortion by offering them the financial aid that is needed out of your own pocket (or the local congregation's collective effort); or to make your house a fostering family would be the micro-scale. To conduct an organized anti-abortion protest in the public space or in front of hospitals would be the macro-scale. While the macro-scale is not condemned per se, the lack of the macro-scale efforts by Christians certainly does not constitute disobedience of God's commandments.

Conclusion

In terms of the understanding of righteousness and its historical usage in Chinese culture, the Lutheran Confessions has its unique contribution to the theological conversation that is needed for good discernment of how righteousness as a divine gift can resolve the conflict between gain and righteousness. Meanwhile, it firmly speaks to Chinese people who seriously reflect on the traditional value of the virtue of righteousness with the evangelical gospel that is the good news of delivering the righteousness of God that tangibly manifests itself through God's people and Christian communities. Not only so, the manifested righteousness of God provides a healing mechanism and buffering cushion in a society that inevitably faces evils and injustice by carrying out the power of forgiveness through Christians who are already personally tasting this reign of righteousness. They are the salt of the earth that hinders the rottenness of humanity and the light of the world that brings in the fresh air of righteousness. Furthermore, the Lutheran Confessions offer the Christian church at large a proper parameter of righteousness that Christians can freely fulfill in various circumstances. Further research can be directed toward other aspects of the concept of righteousness in the Scriptures and Chinese culture, especially through a survey on the translation history of the Chinese bible concerning how the term righteousness has been handled. In that way, we may shed further light on the doctrine of justification and how the gospel can be effectively proclaimed and witnessed to Chinese people as well. After all, evangelism rather than politics is the ultimate concern here, which I hope is clear to my readers.

Endnotes

- 1 'gain/benefit': A Confucian concept similar to *profit* in its capitalistic definition
- 2 Zhaohui Fang, "The Way of Governing in Chinese Culture," *Chinese Reading Weekly*, 2012, <https://www.waxhawyyoga.com/pubinfo/2020/04/28/200001004001/1f481cd8171044dc91441a9e2163af06.html>.
- 3 Five virtues: benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. For more information about Confucianism, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Confucius," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta ed. (Summer 2020), accessed March 27, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/confucius/>.
- 4 Stephen Oliver, "The Moral Visions of the Epistle of James and Zhongyong," (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2002), 130–1, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://scholar.csl.edu/phd/43>. *Zhongyong* is one of the main documents of Confucianism.
- 5 Oliver, "Moral Visions," 133.
- 6 Confucius, "Analects" XIV, 13. Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism, trans. James Legge, 1st edition (Delphi Classics, 2016).
- 7 SC Creed I. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354.
- 8 See note 3.
- 9 SC Creed I. Kolb-Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 354.
- 10 Ap IV 33. Kolb-Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 125.
- 11 Ap IV 24. Kolb-Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 124.
- 12 See the article, "Outspoken Chinese Pastor Wang Yi Sentenced to 9 Years in Prison," by *Associated Press*, quoted in *Christian Today*, December 30, 2019, accessed March 27, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/december/chinese-pastor-wang-yi-early-rain-house-church-sentence-pri.html>.
- 13 See "The Manila Manifesto," <https://lausanne.org/content/manifesto/the-manila-manifesto>.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Confucius, "Analects" XVIII 7.
- 16 CA XXIII. Kolb-Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 64–68.
- 17 *Ibid.*