

The Travel of Fei Mu's film *Confucius* from 1939 to the present

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ABSTRACT: This article traces the unusual trajectory of Fei Mu's film *Confucius*, traveling from 1930s to the present. Based on a textual analysis of *Confucius* the film, I will analyze how the narrative and aesthetics were shaped within historical factors in 1930s and how it is currently received and positioned in a different context with shifting discourses. As conclusion and supplement, I argue that, with the separation between politics and ethics, the core categories 'sage' and 'man' in the debates about 'is Confucius a man or a sage' in 1930s and the present, were deviated from the hermeneutic context of Confucian classics, but reduced as commonsense in public discourse and integrated into individual/subject-privileged modern discourses, which engenders such ideological debates.

KEY WORDS: *Confucius* the film, Fei Mu, Ruxue Re, soft power

Introduction

During the 33rd Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), the Hong Kong Film Archive (HKFA) featured special screenings of a restored film, *Confucius* (1940), directed by Fei Mu 費穆, the leading filmmaker of Chinese left-wing cinema movement (左翼電影運動) in 1930s. Given that Confucius is the most influential sage and philosopher of Chinese civilization, but the biographical film about him in over-a-century history of Chinese cinema, is only this one¹. Seventy years ago, this film is urgently made for patriotic propaganda during the Sino-Japanese war, which manifests the director's worries and anxieties about the future of the nation under such a disaster and the paradoxical attitude of his generation toward Chinese traditional culture. When the film is re-released today, it encounters the new round of debates in China. On the one hand, Confucius as a crucial symbol in China's nationalist policies, 'soft power' (文化軟實力), his status was elevated once again with nationwide revival of Confucianism. On the other hand, other voices interrogate it might be a new wave of god-making movement and oppose such ideological constructions. Instead, they insist on reassessing the merits and faults of Confucian

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¹ However, an upcoming biographical film on *Confucius* is currently scheduled to screen in October 2009, directed by Hu Mei, starring Hong Kong actor Chow Yun Fat playing Confucius. For more information, refer to <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1397498/>

tradition and treating Confucius as an ordinary man. Such an attitude indeed shares many common attributes with the left-wing intellectuals in the 1930s, the May Fourth generation, because of their similar political positions in relation to history. Both are fighting against an authoritative legacy, and both are largely empowered by individual freedom. For example, the pioneer of Chinese modern literature, Lu Xun, once wrote an article in 1930s talking about political manipulation and ideological utilization of Confucius the image in early twentieth century, namely, *Confucius in modern China* (在現代中國的孔夫子). However, the re-release of the film in Hong Kong received well reception. The relevant reports and reviews appearing on different media show that the local sphere obviously tends to embrace the latter tendency.

This article will begin with a close reading of *Confucius* the film, and analyze how the narrative and aesthetics were shaped within various historical factors and especially the transformation of intellectual thought in 1930s. Then we will move to discuss the current reception and position of this film in a different spatio-temporal context with shifting discourses. As conclusion and supplement, I argue that, with the separation between politics and ethics, the core categories ‘sage’ or ‘man’ in the debates about ‘is Confucius a man or a sage’ in 1930s and the present, were deviated from the hermeneutic context of Confucian classics, but were reduced as commonsense in public discourse and integrated into individual-privileged modern discourses, which engenders such ideological debates.

Fei Mu and *Confucius* the film in 1930s

In the ‘Master Class’ section of the 33rd HKIFF program, the most attractive film is Fei Mu’s *Confucius* that was made in Shanghai by Min Hua (民華) Picture in 1939. The film was premiered in Shanghai and later shown across China from the end of 1940 through 1941. It is thought lost following its brief re-run in 1948 until HKFA received a film negative of *Confucius* donated by anonymous collector in 2001². With the help of the experts from the renowned film restoration and conservation workshop L’Immagine Ritrovata of Italy and extensive research by local scholars and researches, the film is released during the 33rd HKIFF. The relatives of the director and producer, conservation team and scholars in Hong Kong and from mainland were invited to the seminar discussion after screenings. The three screenings during the festival was sold out, and the extra screenings were added again and again.

Fei Mu as the leading figure of left-wing cinema movement in 1930s well known for his *Spring in a small town* (小城之春, 1948), which is widely praised as a unprecedented masterpiece and the best Chinese film of all time by later film critics and cinephiles. The ‘Fifth Generation’ director Tian Zhuangzhuang 田莊莊 remade the film for homage to Fei Mu in 2002. The left-wing cinema movement is usually regarded as a golden age in Chinese film history, with a considerable number of valuable works; for its special historical background, the relation between politics and aesthetics in these films are widely discussed. According to *The*

² The re-run in 1948 is reported as a different ‘oversea print’ which Fei Mu was not involved in the re-printing and re-editing, the version HKFA acquired is the original 1941 version or the re-edited one is indeterminate. See *Restored Classic Confucius* 修復經典孔夫子, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009. According to David Bordwell, the HKFA researchers told him that the archive staff would be spending the next year researching how to integrate the fragments and supply a sense of the original’s design. The HKFA is planning to screen that restoration at next year’s festival. Whatever the experts come up with, surely this is a discovery that will be discussed and enjoyed for many years, see <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=4269>

Development of Chinese Cinema (中國電影發展史), with the introduction of cinema into China in 1905, the first narrative films were made in 1910s and China's filmmaking in 1920s are mainly Chinese cinema in the 1920s was dominated by commercial movies with licentious, criminal, or other morally questionable themes. Later, in 1930s, various socially conscious dramatists and other concerned culture workers gathered together and formed the League of Left-Wing Writers(左翼作家聯盟). The Left-Wing intellectuals gradually came to attention of cinema as an instrument, and some of them moved into film production and made their presence felt in a group of films very unlike those produced in the past decades. They presented contemporary social problems and participated in the growing call for national unity in the face of Japanese attacks when Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石 was still following a conciliationist line with the Japanese. The left-wing cinema movement was in fact firstly put forward in *The Development of Chinese Cinema* as an abstraction to define the progressive film culture in the 1930s and the 1940s. Some scholars put that, it was a project supported by the communist government in the late 1950s with the aim of glorifying the political achievement of the left-wing filmmakers and critics in the Nationalist period (1919-1949)³.

With Japanese invasion increasing, 'National Defense Films'(國防電影) appearing⁴, Fei Mu's *Blood on Wolf Mountain* (狼山喋血記, 1936) is a significant one among them. Then the Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937, in November of that year, Shanghai was occupied as 'isolated island'; in December, Nanjing the capital city of *Guomindang* 國民黨 government is captured and Wang Jingwei 汪精衛 established the puppet regime. Under such a circumstance, explicitly patriotic films would be dangerous, and so a tendency to displacement by historical allegory in critical work might be generated⁵, given that historical allegory is a rhetorical technique with a long pedigree in China. The making and screening of *Confucius* (1939) was undertaken in such a harsh environment.

The thought and life of Confucius was recorded in Confucian classics and historical documents, but was continually reinterpreted in later times. Due to the depth and sophistication of his thought and the long Confucian hermeneutic tradition, it is hard to appropriately balance his life trajectories and thought in a biographical film which, no mention to convey educational and propaganda message to the mass audiences at the same time. Judging from the restored version, the emphasis of the plot dramatizes the political practice of Confucius after his fifty rather than his teachings or any other aspects in his life. As Fei Mu's own statement, the script mainly refers to two texts, 'The Hereditary House of Confucius' (孔子世家), in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (史記), and the *Analects of Confucius* (論語), to construct a life story of Confucius⁶.

³ For further discussion, refer to Chris Berry, 'Chinese Left Cinema in the 1930s: Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures,' *Jump Cut* 34 (1989), Pang, Laikwan. *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-37*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman and Littlefield: 2002

⁴ Movies with anti-Japanese sentiments produced in 1930s, resonating with the 'National Defense Literature' 國防文學.

⁵ Those films include *Mulan Congjun*(木蘭從軍,1939) , *Jinzhong Baoguo*(盡忠報國, 1940) , and *Suwu Muyang* (蘇武牧羊,1940)

⁶ Fei Mu 費穆. 'Kongzi jiqi shidai' 孔子及其時代 (Confucius: His Life and Times), in Wong Ain-ling (ed) 黃愛玲編, *Fei Mu: shiren daoyan* 費穆: 詩人導演 (Fei Mu, Poet Director), Hong Kong: xianggang yingpingren xiehui, 1998 (originally published in the special brochure of *Confucius* 《孔夫子》影片特刊, 1940)

The film begins with the neighboring state of Qi 齊 attacking state of Lu 魯 as exposition, followed by the conflict between Confucius and his disciples and the traitors of Lu, especially when Confucius was appointed as the Minister of Zhong Du 中都宰 at the age of fifty (soon shift to Minister of Public Works 司空, then to Justice Minister 大司寇). Deeply disappointed in convincing viceroy of Lu, Confucius resolves to resign his post and spread the doctrine of the virtuous — it is the rising action. He began a long expedition around the small principalities of northeast and central China, including the states of Wei 衛, Song 宋, Chen 陳 and Cai 蔡. With the expedition proceeding, the film shows us Confucius's trajectories on a territories map of the states of Chun Qiu 春秋 ('the Spring and Autumn Period'). He expounded his political beliefs in these states but did not see them implemented. However, the film lay emphasis on the hardship of the expedition, the three disasters on the way recorded in *Analects* are the very climax of the whole film⁷: Confucius and his disciples are besieged by rebels as they pass through Kuang (B.C. 496); then they go on to the state of Song, where they are again attacked by rebels (B.C. 492); in Chen, they are beleaguered with hunger (B.C. 489). After fourteen-year expedition, his political claims were never accepted by any viceroy and lost his favorite son, Confucius decides to return to Lu to write *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋). That is the falling act. In the end, Confucius passes away with his integrity and virtual ideal intact. The storyline is leaner and lucid, basically dovetails with the 'exposition-conflict-rising act-climax-falling act-dénouement' structure with each distinct step.

The tension of narrative is mainly driven by the conflict between the antagonists and the villains. On the one hand, Confucius and three disciples are the characters of the antagonist, each of the three is identity for a distinctive virtue, Zi Lu 子路 is courageous, Zi Gong 子貢 is gifted, and Yan Hui 顏回 is the most benevolent (*ren*, 仁). On the other hand, traitors like Yang Huo 陽貨 and Shao Zhengmao 少正卯 are the ruthless and cruel villains, who shoot an arrow at the corpse to amuse themselves. Scenes from Confucius' life alternate with scenes of political and military strategy, as statesmen and warlords debate tactics and calculate how to eliminate Confucius. It is noteworthy that the moral corruption of the rulers and power holders and the integrity of the virtue idealists are set oppositional and sharp contrasted; all the politician and statesmen in the films are morally defective or even corruption, and the real upright and benevolent men are excluded from such a political arena, perhaps except Zi Gong.

As to the style of cinematic expression, quite different from today's historical epic spectacle and the Hollywood films with historical subject in 1930s, it is more like an 'action by action' theatrical staging film according to the historical events. Some of the fragments show bits of violence in the wars, but the film as a whole relies on dialogue. Between sequences, the intertitles of quotations from different historical document are inserted, to supplement the background information and enforce the narrative. However, it also differs from Fei Mu's fluid 'poetic realism' in *Spring in the small town*, I propose the term 'alienate effect of the historical sphere' to treat the 'rigid' style of the film as a deliberate artistic choice: it is not a dramatic representation, but to create a sense of pastness distancing from us. I will precede this point in following parts.

Firstly, far from the subtle description of inward emotional strain of characters in *Spring in small*

⁷ See *Analects of Confucius*, book IX:5, book VII:23, book XV:2

town, the characters in *Confucius* are more like theatrical personas. The appearance-choosing, costume design and makeup are strictly emphasizing one distinctive aspect of personality, for example, the muscular and reckless Zi Lu, gentle and weak Yan Hui, wretched and insolent Yang Huo. The dialogue line is declaimed in a formal and solemn tone instead of naturally speaking or talking, facial expressions and gestures are relatively rigid, patterned, and rather ceremonial. The cutting is often axial, simply enlarging a chunk of space as actors declaim their dialogue.

Secondly, Fei Mu employs a theatrical approach of historical subject, with theatrical tableaux, painted landscape, for interior setting and backdrop. In this respect, the film recalls Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and Kenji Mizoguchi's *Genroku Chushingura* (1941), Hong Kong local critics aptly note Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) and Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le gallois* (1979) as another parallel⁸. I propose that Fei Mu rather aims to create the symbolic effect in Chinese traditional opera and stresses historical and ancient aura rather than realist representation of historical facts, which we may call *xie yi* (寫意). At the beginning of the film, Qi attacks Lu, the *mise-en-scène* is definitely theatrical. Having hit and blooded the drum, the army parades around the stage as ritual to declare the war. When Yang Huo's induces Kuai Kui 蒯瞶, the former prince of Wei, to return to Wei for usurping power from his father, the whole frame is confined to a brand rampart gate, the two stand against us, casting large shadows on the foreground, which obviously indicates secretary intrigue and evokes the expressionist effect. Another example is the episode, in which Nanzi 南子, viceroy Ling of Wei's wife, meets his former lover Zhao 朝 on the balcony of the palace. A huge statue figure stands by them in contrast to the big full moon: the danger is saturated with the tender moonlight, the adultery of the two is under surveillance. The most impressive backdrop perhaps is the square window or aperture. In some interior scene, a large square window provides a space in which we see the exterior landscape. It seems a picture hanged on the wall that enhances the symmetry of the compositions and deepens the depth of field. The scene when Yan Hui dies, the camera heads toward the inside of the window, we see the close-up of Confucius, suffered the anguish of losing both his on and his favorite disciple, sighing 'God is destroying me! God is destroying me!' (天喪予! 天喪予!)

In certain sequences, some scenes unfold in natural exteriors, but the effect functions more in the way of *xie yi* rather than realist verisimilitude. The episode 'disaster in Chen and Cai', Confucius and his disciples are besieged in a hillside and beleaguered with hunger, against wind and snow. They rest on a small hillside, one or two gather around from the hill foot to the top. Such a well-planned frame stresses on displaying a kind of *shi* (勢) of their inward power. Despite these adversities, Confucius remains undaunted and plays *qin* 琴 and sings responsively to the music to calm down and encourage his disciples. In another scene that Confucius gives teachings to the disciples at the 'apricot forum' (杏壇), the apricot simply decorates the harmony of teaching and learning and the peaceful but powerful mind of Confucius.

The music score also functions to enhance an aura of antiquity for the film. According to the score man Qin Pengzhang 秦鵬章, he had referenced an extensive range of ancient music literature and finally decided on integrating lyrics and zither music extracted from sections of

⁸ Wong Ain-ling 黃愛玲. *Lishi yu meixue* 歷史與美學 (History and Aesthetics), in *Restored Classic Confucius* 修復經典孔夫子, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009

Zhu Zaiyu朱載堉's *Complete Book on Tone system* (樂律全書)⁹ with the original scores he composed¹⁰. His compositions had been created for a wide range of instruments, providing mixed ensembles of complementary Chinese and Western instrumentation for 'restoring' Chinese ancient music.

Thirdly, apart from *xie yi* effect, Fei Mu admits that he also uses some skill of the sublimation approach¹¹, for invoking the audience to reflect the problems in reality. The time of Confucius is extremely turbulent, a series of civic wars happened between principalities and traditional etiquette was deserted; when the film *Confucius* was being made and shown, even the whole nation was plunge into catastrophe. To resonate with the imperative situation, Fei Mu depicts Confucius as a patriotic figure who cannot realize his ideals of civic virtue in such a turbulent period. In some moments of the film, he appears impassioned and sentimental. When Confucius resigns his post as chancellor of Lu, he sighs for the ineffectuality of his endeavor, 'in such a big world, full of selfish and lecherous people, on my own effort, how can I change the situation?' That is a typical scene that easily stirs sympathetic feelings for Confucius' isolated and helpless situation and resonates with reality problem off-screen. Before his death, Confucius still gives teaching to his grandson and disciples at the apricot forum with the Confucian dictum 'Rectify the mind, be sincere, cultivate moral character, establish harmony at home, institute order in the state, and bring tranquility to the world' (正心誠意修身齊家治國平天下), which emphasizes the immortality of the virtuous power and also increases sentimentality. Yet the audiences are deeply moved by the scene 'when a gentlemen dies, he is not exempt from wearing his hat' (君子死不免冠), in which Zi Lu alone fights against the enemies to death and still re-ties the tassels. On the contrary, when Yang Huo is arrested in Qi state, asking 'what crime I am deserved to?', even Qi officials reprimand angrily, 'A traitor's crime!' According to the recount of Qin Pengzhang, when the film was shown in Shanghai, the audiences overwhelming applauded this scene, expressing their anger to the Wang Jingwei puppet regime¹².

Based on the basic examination of the narrative and stylistic traits above, we can find that the whole film dramatizes the ineffectuality of the sage's ideals of civic virtue by showing how power players of his era ignored or undercut his teachings. The mood is full of solemnity and severity, even somewhat sentimental, especially when the expedition ends with failure, Confucius sighs 'nothing successful but going home' which vividly epitomized Fei Mu's position of Confucius in the film. It is quite different from the revered, gleam of wisdom image that were widely known before. But the metaphysical aspect of Confucius's thought on the cosmos, nature,

⁹ Zhu Zaiyu (1536- 1611) is a prince of the Ming dynasty. He was a musician and one of the first people to discover equal temperament in music in 1584.

¹⁰ Qin Pengzhang 秦鵬章. *Kongfuzi yingpian yu yinyue* 《孔夫子》影片與音樂 (Confucius: The Film and Its Music), in *Restored Classic Confucius* 修復經典孔夫子, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009 (originally published in *Shen Daily* 申報, on 25 December, 1940)

¹¹ Fei Mu 費穆. *Da Fangdian Ying Weimin de qiwang yu kongfuzi* 答方典、應衛民的《期望於孔夫子》(Response to Fang Dian and Ying Weimin), in Wong Ain-ling(ed) 黃愛玲編, *Fei Mu: shiren daoyan* 費穆: 詩人導演 (Fei Mu, Poet Director), Hong Kong: xianggang yingpingren xiehui, 1998 (originally published in the special brochure of *Confucius* 《孔夫子》影片特刊, 1940)

¹² Qin Pengzhang 秦鵬章. *Fei Mu yingju zayi* 費穆影劇雜議 (Fei Mu's Film and Drama), in Wong Ain-ling(ed) 黃愛玲編, *Fei Mu: shiren daoyan* 費穆: 詩人導演 (Fei Mu, Poet Director), Hong Kong: xianggang yingpingren xiehui, 1998 (originally published in the special brochure of *Confucius*, 1940)

ethics and care of self etc. is invisible and unmentioned; the relation between his political trajectory and other aspects of his practice and teachings remains unbalanced. As aforementioned, this choice may be limited to the length of a film, the immaturely filmic expression, and most importantly, the imperative for patriotic propaganda. However, this choice is also determined by Fei Mu's understanding of Confucius and traditional Chinese culture.

In the essay 'Confucius: His Life and Time' (孔夫子及其時代), Fei Mu gives us more explanation for his conceiving. He refers to American missionary Gillbert Reid's division of Confucius's thought and teaching into three fields: the study of morality, the study of politics and the study of society. In this regard, Fei Mu concludes that 'Confucius failed miserably in politics', was 'doomed a victim of the politics of his time'. His thought was studied to the last detail by generations of scholars, but never did receive the embrace of 'the time', even his work in cultivating a class scholar-officials failed to produce a single remarkable politician'. In a word, he offered 'the Way (道) but not the craft to realize it'. By admitting Confucius failure in politics, instead, Fei Mu identifies Confucius as a great educator, thinker and philosopher and highly affirms his success of having established 'a moral education system that was uniquely Chinese.'¹³

It is not hard to understand Fei Mu and his generation's paradoxical attitude to Confucius. After China's traumatic nineteenth-century encounter with Western military and cultural invasion, Confucianism was generally regarded as the major cultural obstacle to China's modernization and the thought and teachings of Confucius is invalid and incompatible with modern life. The New Culture Movement (新文化運動) which later turns into political one, the May Fourth Movement, leads a wide revolt against Confucian culture. Compared with the radical iconoclasts (like Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, founder of the Communist Party) reject it completely¹⁴ or critical intellectuals (like Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, the liberal-skeptic historian) question its 'sacred' source, Fei Mu affirms the positive value and significance of Confucius and adopts a comparatists approach. In his essay, Fei Mu compares Confucius with Jesus Christ and at the very beginning of the film he compares Confucius with the 'founders' of other two traditions, Jesus Christ and Sakyamuni Buddha. It lays out the parallel between cultures, the immortal tradition of virtuous and spiritual heritage and connect the Confucian tradition with national consciousness for the imperative of national consolidation.

Such a comparatists approach is inspired by Hu Shi 胡适's the *Outline of Chinese Philosophy* (中國哲學史大綱), the first book to introduce European philosophy history comparing with

¹³ Fei Mu 費穆. 'Kongzi jiqi shidai' 孔子及其時代 (Confucius: His Life and Times), in Wong Ain-ling (ed) 黃愛玲編, *Fei Mu: shiren daoyan* 費穆: 詩人導演 (Fei Mu, Poet Director), Hong Kong: xianggang yingpingren xiehui, 1998 (originally published in the special brochure of *Confucius* 《孔夫子》 影片特刊, 1940)

¹⁴ Having inherited the sentiments of the May Fourth Movement and its aversion of feudalism, people taking a proletarian stance has expectation for Fei Mu to 'use his film as a pointed and satirical commentary to critique the fundamentals of Confucian teachings, highlight the disparity between the time of Confucius and ours, and show that Confucianism is no longer valid in China nowadays. Fei Mu 費穆. *Da Fangdian Ying Weimin de qiwang yu kongfuzi* 答方典、應衛民的《期望於孔夫子》 (Response to Fang Dian and Ying Weimin), in Wong Ain-ling(ed) 黃愛玲編, *Fei Mu: shiren daoyan* 費穆: 詩人導演 (Fei Mu, Poet Director), Hong Kong: xianggang yingpingren xiehui, 1998 (originally published in the special brochure of *Confucius* 《孔夫子》 影片特刊, 1940)

Chinese history of thought which heavily influences today's academic approach to Chinese ancient classics and thought. Fei Mu draws Hu Shi's argument in that book to locate Confucius in the history of Chinese philosophy. Hu Shi's article 'How China Fought a Long War' (中國如何長期作戰) appeared in the *Shen Daily* (申報), on 5 January 1941, discussing the historical consciousness of the Chinese nation in such a way. Hu Shi traced its origin back to her 'living under one empire, one administration, one law, one literature, one education system and one historical culture for over 2,100 years.' The ancient and long 'historical culture' Hu Shi referred to complements the sentiments of Fei Mu's portrayal of Confucius whose spirit refuses to succumb.

Meanwhile, by referencing Carl Crow's *Master Kung*, Fei Mu disavowed himself of the role of a god-maker:

'Confucius the saint and Confucius the man are two characters. 'Confucius' is flesh and blood, a kind and sincere scholar and gentle man; he...experienced the pain of shattered dream and hopelessness never experienced by mankind before. On his deathbed, he himself called his life a failure 'Confucius the saint' is the creation of later scholars of a god-like persona whose every move and word is exalted as sacred, turning him into a 'mysterious icon of knowledge' devoid of flesh and blood'.¹⁵

Fei Mu's skepticism to the difference between 'Confucius the saint' and 'Confucius the man' is similar to what Lu Xun, another iconoclast and the pioneer of modern Chinese literature, discussed in his essay *Confucius in modern China* (在現代中國的孔夫子). With his labeled pungent irony, Lu Xun transliterates Mencius' praise 'the sage whose actions are timely' (聖之時者) into 'modern sage' 摩登聖人 and claims that Confucius as a sage is actually a posthumous prestige. When Confucius was alive, he experienced sufferings and hardship. The authorities of power in later periods made use of his image and elevated him to a terribly untouchable position. In his view, Confucius is the sage on the power players' side, has nothing to do with the populace. He conceived prominent policies for regulating and governing a country, but they are conceived for rulers to rule their people; he did nothing for the populace, because 'rules of ceremony do not go down to the common people.' (禮不下庶人). Even though, 'Confucius must have faults', Lu Xun puts, because 'a sage is also a man' (聖人也是人), thus it is ridiculous for the advocates attempt to stop the populace having other thoughts on Confucius¹⁶. As to the transmissibility of this view, we will discuss later.

Confucius in present

When the film *Confucius* is released seventy years later, another revival of Confucianism and new debate emerge. In the last couple of years, a series of efforts aiming at reviving popular interest in Confucianism, the *ruxue re* 儒學熱 and *dujing re* 讀經熱 that mainly centers at Confucian classics, has been sweeping mainland China.

Chinese policymakers signaled a shift from no-holds-barred growth to a more sustainable model,

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Lu Xun 魯迅. 'Zai xiandai zhongguo de kongfuzi' 在現代中國的孔夫子(Confucius in modern China) in *Qiejieting zawen erji* 且介亭雜文二集 Beijing: Remin wenzue, 1993

from state sovereignty to global harmony, a new word, ‘cultural soft power’ prevails in Chinese political policies and academic discourses. The objective of ‘soft power’ policies is twofold, one is to fill the vacuum of value and belief and the decline of national consolidation, the other is to enhance international influence and cultural output capability. With consideration of laying out cultural soft power, the Chinese government increases the input for developing and promotes Confucianism. In 2007, *Reading* (讀書) journal published an article by New-left scholar Gan Yang 甘陽, namely ‘Chinese road: thirty years and sixty years’ (《中國道路：三十年與六十年》). It asserts that the Chinese reformation should achieve to the unifying of three traditions: Confucian tradition, Mao’s tradition and Deng Xiaoping’s tradition, and proposes a new term ‘Confucian socialism’——that may be one of the most inventive in such a ‘Confucianism fever’ wave in 2007. It paves path for the transformation of political discourse and channels the nationalist sentiment among the masses into a unifying force which legitimizes government policies and action.

Confucius Institute (孔子學院), a non-profit public institute which aims at promoting Chinese language and culture and supporting local Chinese teaching internationally, was established in 2004 and claimed to aim to establish 1,000 Confucius Institutes worldwide by 2020. Domestically, courses on Confucianism are among the most popular on university campuses. The teaching curriculum for secondary schools now includes teaching of the classics and thousands of experimental schools have been set up that focus largely on the classics. In September of 2006, a ‘standard’ Confucius statue and portrait were released internationally, and a large number of scholars signed a proposal to establish Confucius’s birthday as an official ‘Teachers’ Day’. Many media participated and fanned the *ruxue re*, publicity like selection ‘national philosophy masters’ appear on internet. Among them, popularizers of philosophy have been turned into stars by state-run television.

In late 2006, a series of her lectures entitled was broadcast for seven days on China Central Television (CCTV) as part of the Lecture Room (百家講壇), professor Yu Dan 于丹, from Department of Film and Television Media of Beijing Normal University gave her popular version of *Analects of Confucius*. Her lectures were warmly welcomed by the audience. The transcript, edited into a book *Yu Dan's Notes on the Analects* (于丹《論語》心得), sold 10,000 copies within the first day of release. Large skepticism of the academic value of her lecture and book emerged at the same time; intellectuals criticized the ahistorical simplification of her works which reduces Confucian classics to kind of ‘self-training handbook’. Other criticism aims at her tendentiously ignoring the critical tradition of Confucianism. When Chinese society face many reality problems, her lectures deflects the attention from economic and political conditions that actually cause people’s misery, but only one-sided persuade people ‘escape the severe social problems, but retreat back to introspection’ which downplay the importance of social and political commitment and weaken the obligation of government to secure basic means of subsistence. One the face of it, it appears a depoliticizing account of *Analects of Confucius*, but in fact, her account is not as apolitical as it seems. In times of low economic development, her account makes people feel proud about China’s heritage while showing that it’s compatible with the requirement of modern life, which service at the changing discourse of the political future¹⁷.

¹⁷ Bei Danlin 貝淡林, *Lunyu de quzhengzhijhua* 《論語》的去政治化(The de-politicizing of Confucius Analects), *Du Shu* 讀書(Reading), Vol.08, 2007; Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a*

In the promotion of the re-release of Confucius, Hong Kong local media tend to embrace another view of Confucius. The seminar organized by HKFA invited Li Ling 李零, the professor of Beijing University and other local scholars to share their insights on *Confucius* the film and Confucian tradition with local audiences. In film reviews and introductions, local film critics and scholars also tend to connect the two texts, Fei Mu's film *Confucius* and Li Ling's book *Homeless Dog* (喪家狗) together. The book *Homeless Dog* is published in 2007, with subtitle 'reading the *Analects of Confucius*' (我讀《論語》). It is claimed to reassess the merit and fault of Confucius' life and thought through close text reading of *Analects of Confucius*. As Li Ling himself puts, the aim is to show us how 'Confucius the man' is, not by referring to Confucius as the untouchable elevated sage of later times. Because, according to Li Ling, neither Confucius regarded himself as sage nor did the contemporaries of his time. Alike Fei Mu, he claims that 'Confucius the sage' is the creation of later scholars of a god-like persona manipulated by empire statesmen as ruling ideology. Li Ling attempts to undertake an 'unveiling project' only via text reading, but the objective of his critique is actually a long politicizing process, from Confucius to Confucianism.

In pre-Qin period, China was more of a geographical concept than a country with numerous principalities, Confucius and the generations of disciples who succeeded him form only one of the many schools. Han ministers-cum-court-philosophers adopted Confucian thought with Legalism (法家) established the official 'Confucianism' that serve as ideological support, since then, the succeeding stages of Confucianism have been equally political. After China's traumatic encounter with Western military and cultural invasion since late nineteenth-century, during a long time in twentieth century, Confucius and his tradition was generally regarded as the major cultural obstacle to China's modernization. Yet in the second half of the twentieth century it has experienced several attempts at resurrection. These efforts are known as New Confucianism. In a word, Confucianism as the main tradition in China was established alongside the tactics of power playing and authoritarian ideology; it is a long tradition with different strands and different combinations with other values in different traditions. In such a process, Confucius is constantly elevated and sanctified as a revered sage.

Homeless Dog is lucidly written in modern mandarin Chinese. Although Li Ling is trained in archaeology and his main research field focuses on classical Chinese philology and ancient literature with prominent kaoju (考據) skill, the book is criticized for its paucity in historical hermeneutics of Confucian classics and lack of philosophical understanding¹⁸. Another questionable point is his approach of separating the single text from any Confucian hermeneutic tradition and selective use of historical documents to 'prove' the authentic Confucius as an ordinary man¹⁹. The interpretation seems more like a 'literal' reading with classical philological knowledge but in a modern and common-sensible context. However, the most controversial point is the title of the book, *Homeless Dog* — when the revered sage and the Confucian classics is described under such a demeaned label, the media and intellectuals, especially some New Confucianists, felt surprisingly and somewhat offensive. The expression of 'homeless dog' is

Changing Society. Princeton University Press: 2008

¹⁸ Li Jun 李俊. 'Xinpingqihe tan kongzi' 心平氣和談孔子, in *Yuan Dao* 原道 Vol. 13, Beijing: Shoudu Shifan

¹⁹ Ibid

recorded in ‘The Hereditary House of Confucius’, *The Sayings of Confucius* (*kongzijiayu*, 孔子家語) and *The Outer Commentary to the Book of Songs by Master Han* (*hanshi waizhuan*, 韓詩外傳) and is not so reliable according to historians. But it seems more like a self-ironic expression by Confucius, showing his indifference to the appearance compared to virtue compass — We can find such an expression that appears in Fei Mu’s film through Yang Huo’s sarcastic remark, ‘sage of the time is like a homeless dog now’, which is used to highlight the hardship of Confucius’ arduous journey. Li Ling repeatedly emphasized that the objective of his criticism is the ideological manipulation and the sanctified image of Confucius in Chinese history; it is the ‘semiotic of Confucius’ rather than ‘Confucius the man’. On the contrary, he shows admiration and feels sympathetic to ‘Confucius the man’, for he was overwhelmed by a feeling of Confucius’ loneliness and spiritual homelessness in reality. To him, Confucius appears like a doctor without a cure for himself, comparable to Don Quichotte, fighting a lonely fight, misunderstood by his contemporaries. Li Ling and his advocates, for instance, Qian Liqun 錢理群, professor of modern Chinese literature of Beijing University and a specialist in Lu Xun, stress that ‘Confucius the man’ they praise is the virtue idealist, with a utopian vision of the world, but not that Confucius who want to assist the viceroy and statesmen in governing a country²⁰.

As we can see, if the government consciously channels the revival of Confucianism into national ideological policy and political discourses, then a group of intellectuals, represented by Li Ling and Qian Liqun, show their response about depoliticizing and de-ideologicalizing ‘the semiotic of Confucius’. Qian Liqun summarizes their appeal in a five ‘de-’ formula, ‘de-sanctified, depoliticized, demoralized, de-religionized, de-ideologicalized, de-commercialized’(去聖人化、去政治化、去道德化、去宗教化、去意識形態化、去商業化)²¹. One year later, in 2008, Li Ling published his new book titled *De-sanctified view to access the authentic Confucius*(去聖乃得真孔子), which highlights such an appeal again. But we still doubt, what is left after the five ‘de-’ strategies? Can the ‘de-’ formula regain the ‘authentic Confucius’? Can such an approach and position really escape any ideological manipulation as they expected? We will discuss this point in the next part. But, contemporary Chinese intelligentsia indeed shares many common attributes with the May Fourth generation because of their similar political positions in relation to history. Both are fighting against an authoritative legacy, and both are largely empowered by individual freedom. Fei Mu’s anxiety and dilemma under the national crisis in 1930s faced the predicament to reestablish the nationalist identity; then for Li Ling’s generation, having witnessed the cruelty in several political movements during the totalitarian nationalist period, such an attitude represents a certain number of Chinese people’s tiresome and disgust to any nationalist movement. Thus, it is not hard to understand why Hong Kong local media and intellectuals favor to Li Ling’s work and draw it to promote Fei Mu’s film. The post-1997 Hong Kong, after ‘the handover’ of sovereignty, struggles for escaping the nationalist discourses in pursuit of their local identity.

Conclusion

²⁰ Qian Liqun 錢理群. ‘Kongfuzi zai dangxia de mingyun’孔夫子在當下中國的命運 (The fate of Confucius in modern China), in *Sui Bi* 隨筆, Vol.4, 2007

²¹ Ibid

If in those god-making movements in Chinese history, Confucius is sanctified and even worshiped as a god, then, the voices of skepticism seems more 'politically correct' as an action to unveil ideological construction in current revival of Confucianism. However, the de-sanctified view of authentic Confucius they propose is a view saturated with 'pan-liberal' idea of individual and subject, an ordinary man, with blood and flesh, morally imperfect. Here we must put out three points:

Firstly, the atomized and individualistic consciousness and 'critical free-thinking' began to widely prevail since May Fourth, and to now it seems undoubtedly basic principle and is taken for granted in China's public sphere. The basic humanity and intelligence in commonsensible term, like what Li Ling asserts that he believes in, become the new belief and even authority. But such a belief itself has its own ambivalence and remains unexamined; it is not as necessarily legitimate as it seems. 'Confucius the man' is definitely a 'fictitious' product shaped by the individual/subject-privileged discourse, which, in a way, shares the same principle with the ideological construction.

Secondly, the concept 'sage' has its own historical transformation and hermeneutic tradition. But in Confucian classics, it never emphasizes the supreme position of power, nor has it an untouchable transcendence as a god in opposition to 'man'. Instead, it proposes that 'there is a sage in everyone's heart', and 'if we really wanted Goodness, we should find that it was at our very side' (我欲仁，斯仁至矣). It indicates insight into essence, the world and order of human society. Confucius is considered as a sage for his prominent wisdom on such aspects, which can be teacher of later generations. To simply judge 'whether Confucius is a sage or man' outside Confucian tradition is meaningless, especially when we overlook its historical hermeneutic transformation. Besides, such an inquiry itself can only be produced in modern context with presupposition as we discussed before.

Last, in such ideological debates, the political dimension is either expelled (Yu Dan's version) or considered as moral corruption, conspiracy intrigue and ideological manipulation (Fei Mu, Li Ling and Qian Liqun's version) and the politic and virtue idealism are antagonistic. However, virtue compass and political practice is never an oppositional couple in Confucian coherentism (吾道一以貫之), but indicates the coherencies and unification of ethics and politics (內聖外王). The separation between the two fields (as Fei Mu refers to Gillbert Reid's division aforementioned) and reduction of those concepts as common sense in public discourse engendered such ideological debates. It is far away from an appropriate approach to access and rediscover the Confucian tradition but cut off a valuable tradition to reflect the political and ethnic situation in the global era.

The expected release date of a new film *Confucius* (2009) is claimed to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, as well as the 2,560th birthday of Confucius himself. With a curiosity look of the released posters, it seems another lavish spectacle for promoting cultural symbolic figure worldwide. We hope such an unusual travel of Fei Mu's *Confucius* from 1930s to the present may cast us a twilight for future reflection.

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