

Chapter 3

The Confucian Individual

ABSTRACT

Confucian individualism is analogous to the Western acclaim for personal individuality. The notion of individualism, which is seen as fundamental and pervasive in Western civilization, is not to be contrasted with collectivism, which is perceived in Eastern societies as the underlying social structure. The Chinese, on account of Confucius, conceive of individuals and family as subordinated to the importance of society or the state. Confucius was mindful of the essential status of individuals when he, as an individual, performed the rituals at the funeral of his mother, having individually studied the ancient history pertinent to the rites. An occasion of ontological impracticality is the fact that the exclusive attention to communal concord and harmony at the expense of personal individuality cannot have contributed to the medical advances and the breakthroughs made possible in modern medicine. Also discussed in this chapter is the contribution of Confucius in the academic sphere of the Chinese society.

INTRODUCTION

Analogous to the Western acclaim for personal individualism is Confucian individualism. The teachings of Confucius and Mencius exemplify Eastern civilization whereas Western civilization encompasses distinct topics and subjects from numerous traditions: Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and European traditions. Both Confucianism and Western civilization espouse the primacy of individual moral rectitude. However, in contrast to Western

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civilization, Confucianism deems ancestor worship as integral to filial piety. Confucianism has heretofore been regarded as a collective (Fukuyama, 1995) communitarian dogma whose *modus operandi* is authoritarian (Park & Shin, 2006). Individualism is conversely relegated to Western culture or civilization. Nonetheless, the Chinese are much more individualistic than meet the eye. This is so due to the Confucian virtue of filial piety and ancestor worship, which individualize the Chinese people. The family, being a practical epitome of authoritarianism, became the conduit of individualism. The family ontologically depicted the roles and obligations that characterized individuals in the Confucian epistemic orthodoxy.

The Centrality of Individuality in Confucianism

The notion of individualism, seen as fundamental and pervasive in Western civilization, is not to be contrasted with collectivism, which is perceived in Eastern societies as the underlying social structure. Collectivism is emphasized in Confucian heritage societies as a technique of sociopolitical control and administration. The notion of homogeneity is generally recounted as battle cry in solidarity to a designated cause. In some circumstances, homogeneity may refer to legislation, regulation, or phenomena that is applicable to a people under a given political regime. Homogeneity, which, to a certain degree, may be regarded as tantamount to collectivism, is typically devoid of individual opinion and/or rationalization in so far as it relates to a group. Japan, a Confucian heritage country, is regarded as a homogeneous society (Burgess, 1986; Chira, 1986).

The exclusive attention to communal concord and harmony at the expense of personal individuality cannot have contributed to the medical advances and the breakthroughs made possible in modern medicine. Personal individualism was never intended to exist as a phenomenon outside the confines of sociocultural homogeneity. Homogeneity is a prominent characteristic feature in all aspects of Confucianism, including ethics, epistemology, administration, and politics. By serving as a benchmark for individual conformance and diversions, homogeneity absolves the personal identities of individuals and facilitates absolute sociopolitical and administrative control. The primacy of community or state over individual existence exposes incoherence in the Confucian dictum praising or equating a social stratification that restrains the natural or biological relevance of individuals.

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