

Modern Neo Confucianism in Mainland China: Its Development and Limitations

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Introduction

After the Reform and Open Door policy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced a threat to its ruling, as Qing Cao noted, “Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic policies forced China onto the road of capitalism, the spectre of an ideological vacuum, the legitimacy of CCP and the deepening societal faith crisis have increasingly haunted the Beijing ruling elite”(Qing Cao 2007, 434). In this situation, the CCP realized that they needed a new ideology¹ which could suppress the spread of liberalism and help the CCP to maintain its regime. Therefore, the CCP politically began to support Neo Confucianism which the CCP destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. By emphasizing Chinese traditional culture and using various key values of Confucianism, the CCP successfully made its legitimacy (Xiaoping Cong 2013, 919-920). At the same time, as the influence of Modern Neo Confucianism² increased in China, some Confucians began to “argue for replacing Marxism with Confucianism as the core ideology of the one-party state” (Daniel A. Bell 2015, 33). Given the situation in which the CCP excessively uses Confucian concepts in domestic and foreign policies in the name of *Makesizhuyi Zhongguohua* 马克思主义中国化(Marxism’s Chinaization), it seems that the CCP puts greater emphasis on Modern Neo Confucianism and is making Modern Neo Confucianism its ruling ideology.

Considering the fact that ideology of the CCP plays an important role in Chinese changing politics, it is significant to discuss the possibility of Modern Neo Confucianism to be the ruling ideology of the CCP. This paper demonstrates that Modern Neo Confucianism in Mainland China has limitations to replace ruling ideologies of the CCP by exploring the relationship and conflicts between the CCP and the Modern Neo Confucianism as well as the countermeasure of the CCP toward Modern Neo Confucianism’s challenge.

1. The development of Modern Neo Confucianism

With The CCP’s Open Door policy, not only western science and technology but also the western cultures based on capitalism and liberalism were introduced into China. Because of the absence of national identity caused by the Cultural Revolution and vacuum of ideology led to by the alternation of political line, the abrupt inflow of western cultures caused severe

side effects in the CCP's building a socialist state. A good example for that is the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989 which called for liberalist values such as liberty and democracy. In this situation, the CCP which couldn't abandon Reform and Open Door policy to achieve economic growth needed to find a certain way to restrain the demands of liberalists and maintain its regime.

Therefore, it is understandable that the CCP had interest in Neo Confucianism which the Chinese began to focus on autonomously in 1980s with reaction to the Cultural Revolution and the invasion of western cultures. As Modern Neo Confucians dissented from New Cultural Movement which called for *Quannmian Xihua* 全面西化 (complete Westernization) in 1910s, it seemed to be a good method to deal with the invasion of liberalism and make legitimacy of the CCP. Hence, the CCP strategically began to support the research of Neo Confucianism to overcome the political dilemma and keep going on the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In fact, despite of some ideological contradictions between Marxism and Neo Confucianism such as the conflict between materialism and spiritualism or Confucians' resistance to western culture including socialist theories, the CCP had several reasons to choose Neo-Confucianism. First, Modern Neo Confucians emphasized the national identity against western values. This could help the CCP protect its legitimacy against liberalist demands. Second, they gave the CCP the answers about how to build modern culture with Chinese characteristics in a globalized world. Third, economic developments of some Asian nations, which were accomplished in the name of Confucian Capitalism, provided the CCP with an authoritarian economic model and a chance to induce the investment of oversea Chinese in the name of Chinese nationalism.

In 1989, the CCP selected research projects for Modern Neo Confucianism as the seventh 5-year key projects for Philosophy and Social Science, and then began to extensively sponsor it. In 1992, the CCP re-selected research projects for Modern Neo Confucianism as the eighth 5-year key projects for Philosophy and Social Science. These research activities of Modern Neo Confucianism called *Guoxuere* 国学热 (National Studies Fever) were academic projects politically led by the CCP. In particular, as adhering to Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the CCP can reinforce the meaning of "Chinese Characteristics" from the combination of socialist political system and the capitalist economic system to the combination of socialism and Chinese traditional thoughts by adding traditional concepts of Modern Neo Confucianism to Chinese socialism.

The CCP achieved success to reconcile the socialism and traditional thoughts of Modern Neo Confucianism, and developed the reconciliation to the concept of *Makesizhuyi Zhongguohua*. In last two decades, with the sensation of Modern Neo Confucianism, the CCP aroused social integration, patriotism, and nationalism in China as what the CCP

intended. For example, former president Hu Jintao used the concept of *Hexieshehui* 和谐社会 (Harmonious society) to resolve the conflicts of social classes. The concepts of *Tianming* 天命 (Heaven's will) and *Minben* 民本 (people as the basis) helped the CCP consolidate its ruling in opposition to demands for political reform (Qing Cao, 435-436). In addition, the CCP has intensified its cogency and propagation in practicing its policies by aggressively using key values of Confucianism as propaganda. A clear example is *Shehuizhuyi Hexin Jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观 (Core Socialist Values) such as *Fazhi* 法治 (the rule of law), *Jianye* 敬业 (dedication), *Chengxin* 诚信 (integrity), *Youshan* 友善 (friendship), which were declared in the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. In this sense, the CCP seems to achieve its goal with success by effectively and politically utilizing Modern Neo Confucianism.

Through the development process of Modern Neo Confucianism, we can see that Modern Neo Confucianism in Mainland China has an innate limitation. In other words, Modern Neo Confucianism did not develop for itself, but it was rather developed by the CCP for its own political purposes to complement the legitimacy of the CCP and countervail the influence of western values which threatened the CCP's building socialist state. In this sense, Modern Neo Confucianism was subordinate to the CCP in its development process.

2. Limitations of Modern Neo Confucianism

With the rapid development by the deliberate support of the CCP, Confucians has their own propose to enhance national consciousness and achieve the revival of Neo Confucianism in China. As its influence increased, Modern Neo Confucians began to deny the subordinate relationship to the CCP.

This started with *Wenming Duihua* 文明对话 (the dialogue of civilizations) posed by Modern Neo Confucians. While rebuilding philosophical system of Neo Confucianism as the demand of the CCP, they tried to expand their research area. In 1989, they insisted an equal dialogue of civilizations to rationally understand Liberalism, Marxism and Chinese traditional Confucianism. This process was the expression of their will to build the equal position with Marxism, departing from the subordinate relationship to the CCP. After the dialogue, some Confucians caused conflicts with the CCP, by criticizing Marxism and revealing the last goal of Modern Neo Confucianism's development is to defeat Marxism (Zhang Sanping 2011, 84-85). For example, Liu Shuxian criticized Marx's materialism, insisting "We cannot find any value of life through Marxism, because Marx's study was focused on the structure of economic society. We must recover the spirit of humanity Chinese tradition emphasized" (Liu Shuxian 1992, 27). In the 25th anniversary lecture in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Xu Yingshi denounced the Xinhai revolution, the May 4th Movement, the CCP's establishment, and the Cultural Revolution as radical movements. As we see, after the dialogue of civilizations, some

Confucians began to consider that Marxism was not the objective they had blind faith in, but an equal thought they could criticize and change. That means Marxism, the ruling ideology of the CCP, was degenerated into a thought which can be changed out of necessity. This is the considerable threat to the CCP which holds on to Four Fundamental Principles.

In addition, as the CCP utilized the concepts of Confucianism in political, economic and cultural fields, some Confucians increased their influences from philosophical field to other fields. A clear example is Jiang Qing known as a political Confucian. He insisted Confucianism must replace Marxism and Leninism to be the key thought of Chinese national consciousness in China and suggested the Constitutional system based on Confucianism (Jiang Qing 2005). Since 1990s, these Confucians increased their influences through various methods such as articles, publications, lectures and website postings, thus causing anti-Communism movements (Ye Zhijian 2008, 15-16).

How does the CCP deal with these challenges? The CCP tries to maintain the dominant-subordinate relationship with Modern Neo Confucians and restrain its political challenges by defining these Confucians as the combination of Marxism and Neo Confucianism. In fact, Lin Anwu divided Modern Neo Confucians into two groups, which are Modern Neo Confucians in 1980s and Post-modern Neo Confucians in 1990s according to the change of philosophical ideas (Lin Anwu 2007, 21-26). Accepting this classification method, Xu Qingwen re-named Post-modern Neo Confucianism as Contemporary Neo Confucianism and defined Contemporary Neo Confucianism as the combination of the Neo Confucianism and Marxism. As he noted, "Post-modern Neo Confucians are those who received a great impression of Marxist practice theory" (Xu Qingwen 2013, 124-125), it seems that the CCP is developing Modern Neo Confucianism with "Chinese Characteristics". Compared to Confucians in other Asian nations, Confucians in mainland China tries to compensate the defect of morale practice of Neo Confucianism, which, they think, is defective, autocratic, blood-centered and human affection-centered, by combining moral values of Neo Confucianism with the Marxist practice theory.

Besides, Post-modern Neo Confucians are diversified into several groups such as political Confucians, economic Confucians, and cultural Confucians. Through this division of Modern Neo Confucianism, the CCP restricts conflicts between the CCP and Modern Neo Confucianism into political or ideological field. This demonstrates that the CCP will continue to utilize Modern Neo Confucianism as a complementary ideology to achieve its political and economic purposes. In this sense, clearly, the CCP will not allow Modern Neo Confucianism to challenge the ruling ideology of the CCP for a short term. Hence, Modern Neo Confucianism cannot apply its political and cultural leverages as it implies or as some Confucians expect.

Conclusion

Since 1980s, Modern Neo Confucianism has played an important role in political, economic, cultural, and academic fields in mainland China. However, it is hardly expected that Modern Neo Confucianism will cause the CCP's ideological transition or affect the political change of China, because, as we see, initially it was developed by the CCP for some political reasons. Consequently it had a subordinate relationship to the CCP. In this relationship, with the increase of influences in last two decades, Modern Neo Confucianism still is used as a complementary ideology to accomplish the CCP's goals.

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Notes

- 1 Ideology has various implications in epistemic, political, cultural fields. In this paper, the author focuses on the role of ideology as the medium which develops political struggles rather than the question about false consciousness.
- 2 The term "Modern Neo Confucianism" was used by Taiwan scholars to distinguish Neo Confucianism in Contemporary China and Neo Confucianism of Song and Ming dynasties. In this paper, Modern Neo Confucianism indicates Neo Confucianism which has developed since 1980s in China according to the definition of Fang Keli. See Zheng, Jiadong, *Xiandai Xinruxue Gailun*, p.18-19 or Jana S. Rosker, "China's modernisation: From daring reforms to a modern Confucian revival of traditional values.", p. 97.