

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF CONFUCIANISM IN VIETNAM

Abstract: *Confucianism, also known as the Way of Scholars or the Teachings of Confucius and Mencius, has a significant contribution towards the Vietnam's traditional culture. However, from the past to the present, it has often been viewed as a politico-social doctrine. Actually, during its existence and development, Confucianism has had a system of concepts, rites, and practices associated with ideas of the universal principles and of the mankind which plays as a foundation for viewing it as a religion. This article seeks to shed light on the religious perspective of Confucianism and of Confucianism in Vietnam.*

Key words: *Confucianism, the way of scholars, Confucius, state religion, official religion.*

1. Introduction

Confucianism has been so much familiar with the Vietnamese. Yet is it perceived as a politico-social doctrine or as a religion? The majority of researchers have largely agreed that it is a doctrine. It seems to be unusual to ask whether it is a religion since it has been often considered and analysed as a politico-social doctrine.

Evidently, during its existence, Confucianism has had a system of conceptions and rites which can be seen as foundations for us to consider it as a religion. In Vietnam, for a long time, the religious position and characteristics of Confucianism have not been adequately paid attention to as it should be.

This article is an attempt to shed light on the religious perspective of Confucianism. Therefore, the contents concerned here will not be the doctrinal perspective. Although citations will be used, the main target is demonstration of my view of Confucianism as a religion. This approach

* PhD., Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

will lead us to the explanation of many phenomena of views of human life, its behaviours, customs, and individual and collective ethical norms in the Vietnamese society in the past and at the present.

It is necessary to remind readers of some related concepts including the Confucius's teachings, Confucianism, and the Way of Confucius and Mencius. These concepts refer to all doctrines which partly recomposed by Confucius, written by Confucius, extended, modified and made sacred by later generations.

It was said that where Confucianism was present there would be Confucians around and vice versa. Confucianism seemed to be a timeless and spaceless concept. Yet at present, with enough time for analysis, this is not always true. Regarding time factor, there was the Way of Scholars before Confucius, Confucianism by Confucius, and later forms of Confucianism which often associated with Chinese dynasties, including Han, Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing. Confucianism's space was also different, within large China and in nations where it reached to such as Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. That is why there are Vietnamese Confucianism, Japanese Confucianism, and Korean Confucianism.

Generally speaking, since Confucianism under the Han dynasty onwards, the religious perspective became more and more visible. After many ups and downs, especially the terrible event of "burning books and burying scholars" during Qin dynasty, Confucianism regained its reputation and even became much more respected than Confucius's time since Han dynasty. Then Confucianism began to be considered as the State's official ideology and also the national religion. Also since Han dynasty, the Way of Scholars could be called Confucianism. Here I would like to borrow a researcher's view to present briefly the religious characteristics of the Confucianism: First, books by Confucius and his great disciples are considered classics and sacred texts; second, the whole content of the doctrine is deified and made sacred; third, key Confucians are deified and worshipped in a separated place called "temple of literature". Confucius himself and famous disciples are worshipped according to national standards. In this way, factors have been fully accumulated to consider Confucius a creator of a religion.

Further, according to Confucianism's principles, an emperor is a combined representative between Heaven and Mankind and between

Gods and Mankind thus we need to pay attention to the religious perspective shown in the ordainment of gods and deities by an emperor. This aspect of an emperor reminds us of the fusion between power of a god and power of an earthly person as we can see in kings in Europe of the medieval period. Yet there is a difference. In China, there was not a class of clergy surrounding the half god - half human king. The relationship between a Chinese emperor with the Heavenly Emperor needed no such clergy as mediums. He himself was an ultimate representative and has all power of an earthly emperor. He was a direct manifestation of a humanized Heavenly Emperor.

Since the Han dynasty, the Way of Scholars or Confucianism both took the role of an official ideology and an official religion. Previous studies often neglected the religious perspective, like I have mentioned above.

In short, the three concepts the Way of Scholars, Confucianism, the Way of Confucius and Mencius, according to our understandings, are not much different though they are certainly not a unified entity. Meanwhile, their usage creates the habit to view Confucianism as a politico-social doctrine thus eclipses important aspects including rites and practices associated with views of the world and of human life. From this point onwards, the concept Confucianism has the same meaning as we talk about Buddhism, Christianity, or Taoism, etc.

Yet we should also discuss the role of the monarchic State as it sought to monitor and implement most important Confucianism' rites and ceremonies. Such a state also set rules of official worshipping places within the society. Therefore, we can call Confucianism an official religion/mainstream religion without worrying of the mistake we may make. Hereunder, let's review the basic doctrines by Confucius and by his disciples from which a state religion, called Confucianism, was formed.

2. Confucianism: State religion/official religion

Doctrines by Confucius revealed in his primary teachings then the continuous supplementation even ideas that he never proposed when alive. To review Confucianism, we cannot neglect main traits of history, doctrines by Confucius and his disciples through different periods.

Confucius, full name Kong Qiu was born in 551 BC (the 21st year of king Ling of Zhou) in Shandong province of China. Rumours said that before he was born, there appeared a unicorn which dropped a line of

scripts which read: “He is the son of the God of water, and the successor-without-throne of the king of the Zhou”. When he was born, the unicorn disappeared yet two dragons and five stars in the form of five old men surrounded his home¹. Confucius was born and grew up in the society full of turmoil under the late Zhou dynasty. Spring -Autumn period was followed by the Warring States time.

Yet, it was also the time when Chinese civilization had great achievements which made China one of the focal points with great influences in the ancient world. Before and after Confucius’ birth, the East began to transform and world religions appeared one after another: Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, Christianity in Near Middle East. This process took place within 500 years but had deep influences on the progress of the world history in the next two millenniums.

Upheavals during late Zhou by warring states created new situation. That was the Qin’s victory which led to the unification of the whole vast land and of the political system (which previously was just a dependent state located in the south of the present Shansi province). Qin Shi Huang defeated warring states and unified the whole vast land then established the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. Qin Shi Huang set up 36 administrative regions and managed them through assigned mandarins. This was the ideal type of the administrative system that would be used in over 2,000 years later.

Qin Shi Huang was a king who held ultimate power. His court was built based on philosophical and political doctrine of the Scholars of Law which was known as one of the great schools in the Warring States period. Followers of this school imposed a practical administration, denied all other ideological systems and the worship of legendary Five Emperors and deities of the ancient time. The tragic event of “burning books and burying scholars” in 213 BC took place in that context. The *Book of Poems*, the *Book of Documents* and books by the Hundred Schools of Thought were burnt out. The fire also eradicated books about agriculture, medicine, fortune telling, rituals, etc.

The Qin’s destiny was short (221 - 206 BC) yet its great achievement in the unification of the whole land left a long impact. In order to claim the whole territory like what we can see today, China has spent more than 2,000 years.

In 206 BC, the Han dynasty came into existence. It was divided into two great periods: Early Han or Western Han (206 BC - 25AD) and Late Han or Eastern Han (25 - 220 AD) which last over 400 years before and after the year 1 AD.

The Han ruled over the land unified by the Qin. Claimed the regime by a war against the Qin which was convicted of being “anti-tradition”, the Han had some kinds of tolerance towards ancient tradition, such as it re-established the allocated lands for great commanders and their fathers. Yet not all allocated lands enjoyed their independent status and the land owners did not now had the ultimate power on their lands like under the previous Zhou dynasty. Now, they had to pay taxes on the interests they got from the cultivated lands, to obey advices by the king and the court, and their private lives were watched or interfered with. People were watched closely and whoever had different viewpoints with the King’s, he would be caught and executed. Thus we could call this feudal upper class those who had no privilege.

People who had real power in the Han society, a society organized according to the unified and power-centralized model, were the scholar-mandarins. These were the social class that made the most use of the unification. They became the social class who had education, a significant number, became the administrators who conveyed all the advantages and disadvantages of the new context. Precisely, they were descendants of the clerks-scholars of the former warring states who mostly came up from the lower class yet they were educated. They could never become the confronting force to the upper class. However, with knowledge and the experience in management, they were those who could not be neglected by the Court's administrative structure. This class of scholar -mandarins played the role like the backbone of the structure of state officials. They were the class that would protect the system over 2,000 years regardless changes in dynasties, socio-political crises or the foreign invasions. Confucianism or the official/state religion was the religion of this class.

The fire set by the Qin dynasty was not strong enough to force people forget the ideas of the One Hundred Schools of Thought and ancient traditions. There were schools that survived at the early time of the Han and they thoughts were the mixture of beliefs inherited from ancient

religions, myths and magic. There was an effort to search for a religious-political doctrine to fit the new context. According to a popular habit, it was often classified as Taoism (previously thoughts and practices by Lao Tzu) and Confucianism.

Taoist hermits who produced “special medicine” in forms of pills represented the first type. They were experts in methods and techniques in using magic. They sought to shape life of the upper-class people so as to build up a good dynasty based on the fusion of all past philosophical schools’ ideas. They were also practitioners of magic or mystic techniques inherited from tales of deities, or from male and female spirit mediums. Some of them paid attention to choosing good hours, picking out a system of omens, while others were interested in mystical cosmology.

The second type consisted of those who were experts in rituals, ceremonies, ethics and politics and saw themselves as followers of Confucius and his doctrine. Teachings and annotations by Confucius and his disciples were compiled into Confucianism’s doctrinal books, often called *Five Classics* and *Four Books* which were forbidden under Qin Shi Huang’s order. In Confucian scholars’ views, a prosperous dynasty would be the dynasty at which ethics prevailed. These scholars often complemented ethical standards set as perfect samples by ancient societies under legendary Five Emperors such as Emperor Yao, Emperor Ku, and Emperor Zhuanxu. They believed that these standards represented total integration with universal order and the Tao and this would ensure the peace and prosperity upon the people. Confucianism had become a doctrine of the scholars and this created favourable conditions for it to provide a general conception of the world, of *Rite* or *Li* (similar to what today considered *religion*), and of social life and the State which facilitated the rational adaptation with the new social context.

From beginning of the Han, scholars had emphasized the absolute power in ruling the nation and people of the King as the son of Heaven, and added in sacred dimensions with religious perspectives into the power possessed by the Han emperor.

In several tens year of the Early Han dynasty, difference between Taoist hermits following mystic doctrines and Confucian scholars was not much. In reality, all disciples of different schools had together formed

the system of officials of the court. They were often under influence from the other. There were Taoist hermits who were influenced by Confucianism's ethics. At the same time, there were scholars who believed in pantheons of deities or practised fortune telling and omens reading. Furthermore, the *Book of Y Ching*, the book of abstract thoughts, was both complimented by Taoists and Confucian scholars. Thus, it is understandable that the *Y Ching* ranks top in all the *Five Classics* and *Four Books*. The harmony and fusion between two religions, also two philosophical systems, had created an official religion with the prominent role of Confucianism.

Also since the Han dynasty, the search for books by the Hundred Schools of Thought was started over with distinction between those composed by Confucius and those by his disciples. This time, fragments stored in families were rediscovered and compiled into Six Classics (later Five Classics) for Confucian scholars to use. Actually, these were re-translated, re-interpreted, and revised versions from fragmented ancient texts. Thus these books represented new spirit in which Confucius' doctrine was considered the official doctrine of the contemporary era.

It should be noted here that ancient texts were considered old texts to differ from the revised version during Early Han known as new texts. Paragraphs with contents related to religion and rites could only be seen since the Han and supplemented by later dynasties. This is the foundation for us to understand the contents of the official religion.

During the formation of this official religion, since the 2nd century and several next centuries, there appeared other texts said to be written by Confucius. Although these texts were seen as supplements for the Classics, genius scholars called them "false texts". They were scattered in various different works. Despite of being denied by official scholars, these texts made great influences on the scholars in general. They consisted of numerous paragraphs related to religious events.

As Taoists (many were unregistered doctors) and Confucian scholars were confronting each other so as to obtain the endorsement of the King and the Court, Dong Zhongshu, a famous scholar, published *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* to generalize key features of mysticism and rites and ethics and explained them through rational views by Confucius' disciples. Foundation of the book was the concept

“interactions between Heaven and Mankind”. This conception considered omens as signs of Heaven’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The Heaven was seen as an entity with ultimate power and has human quality. Dong Zhongshu brought in Confucianism concepts such as Yin-Yang and Five Elements. These were ancient concepts, altogether formed ancient Chinese’s cosmology during 4th - 3rd centuries BC. Taoists used these concepts very often.

Dong Zhongshu, through the book, became the founder of doctrine for scholars and for the State Confucianism which later religious elements and rites formed the official religion. We can call him the creator of Confucianism. With him, the Way of Scholars had become Confucianism. Regarding doctrine, Confucianism under the Han dynasty can be called the Reformed Way of Scholars.

With a closer look at doctrine through historical periods, we can see many contradictions within a text and annotations by expert-scholars (specialized in one or a number of the *Classics*) who worked at the Teaching House - an unit established by Hanwudi in 124 BC which was responsible for composing and making annotations for the *Classics*.

In the 2nd century, two great scholars generalized annotations for all the *Classics*. They selected annotations that were considered suitable with the Classics or with their own interpretations. They strictly reserved basic features of Confucianism since Dong Zhongshu’s works such as the Jade Emperor had humanity, the doctrine of interaction between Heaven and Mankind, or the doctrine of Five Elements. With all their efforts, these two scholars made a great success through creating the doctrine of solidarity. They did have great influences on scholars during 222 - 580.

In 175, State scholars who were desperately promulgating Confucianism became satisfied at the Emperor's approval of engraving contents of the doctrine onto stone boards. It was said that there were 46 stone boards placed next to the Teaching House in Luoyang - the capital city of Late Han dynasty. This marked a great important event in the history of Chinese Confucianism. It was told that there were numerous people who came to read and make copies of the engraved doctrine. The making of copies was easy thanked to the invention of a special type of paper since 105 by an official. This type of paper replaced the silk which used to be too much expensive and hard to provide good quality.

However, the work by these two scholars also had critics. In the 3rd century, there appeared new annotations. Mainly, these annotations criticized the previous version which followed Dong Zhongshu so close that made wrong interpretations of the true teachings by Confucius. These new scholars argued that the Jade Emperor almost had no humanity. In some aspects, they tended to be closer to the metaphysical doctrine by Taoism. All these new scholars made annotations for *Tao Te ching* by Laozu. They provided different versions of some parts of the Classics, especially the *Book of Documents*. They even re-composed books that were considered “false books” based on their own conceptions.

During Southern-Northern dynasties period (304 - 581), in North China, there were some foreign dynasties originated from Mongolian tribes who competed with each other to rule the northern region. Yet China's had great power of resistance in term of culture. At this time, Buddhism had achieved great successes while Confucianism was still the foundation for China's civilization which could be seen through official rituals and the presence of scholar -mandarins. This was the factor that stabilized the society though under foreign ruling forces. Under the Northern dynasty, annotations for the Classics by Zheng Xuan were considered the foundations for the State views. In Southern dynasty (which historians of the later generations considered legitimate and official because of the Chinese's establishment), as Confucianism competed with Buddhism and Taoism thus it had to step backwards sometimes and this was criticized by Confucian scholars of the later generation. However, doctrines by scholars and disciples had always been remained.

From 581 to 589, the Sui unified China. This unification was maintained in over 500 years (except the period of late Tang and Early North Song 907 - 959). The northern region was basically occupied by the foreign Jin. From mid-land downwards, the land was under administration by different Chinese rulers known as Five Dynasties. Since the Sui and the Tang, Buddhism flourished. Some kings of the Tang even institutionalized Buddhism and made it official within the State structure. However, Confucianism was still the main doctrine of the State.

Emperor Taizhong realized the situation that Confucian scholars were divided with different regions under different interpreters' influences. Once again, Confucianism was systematized yet not coherent enough.

Buddhism's influence on social awareness kept increasing, especially since the Tang. At the same time, *The Book of Y ching*, used by both Taoist and Confucian scholar, became the compulsory text book till the 10th century when the Song began to rise.

During the Song dynasty, Confucianism was fully established. Later, people called this period the time of "Three Religions coexisted". This suggested the interactions between Buddhism and Confucianism. After going independent ways of development, the two religions felt the need to together provide explanations the nature of the world and human beings through universal philosophies. However, that was the issue that Taoism dealt with for a long time while Confucians seemed to neglect. Since then, Confucianism presented concepts "universe" and "void" as primary principles and these were likened with Tao through concept of *Tianli* as the eternal principle lied within everything. Without this *Tianli*, nothing existed.

The new perfect representative for neo-Confucianism was Zhu Xi. He spent his early life to study Buddhism and Taoism. His work reached the peak of what was called Neo-Confucianism. According to him, *Tianli* was eternal and existed before heaven and earth. It was this *Tianli* that made *qi* (energy) light. From *qi*, Yin and Yang were born. Yin went down to create earth while Yang went up to create heaven. Yin and Yang were both in opposite and intermingled within the space and created everything in infinity.

Indeed, the metaphysics mentioned above belongs to history rather than philosophy. However, the way of thinking and that metaphysics opened up the way to reflect religion. Moreover, national examinations to select State officials created foundations for explaining the Five Classics and Four Books (including, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Mencius*, *Analects*, *Great Learning*). *Analects*, *Great Learning* specially emphasized on Rites through notes of offerings and detailed basic rules of worship. These were presented clearly so that scholars would not only find it easy to remember but also to cultivate their deep religiosity. These were the fundamental concepts and views of religion.

Now, let us come back to consider Confucianism's concepts and rites. It was called the official religion to partly differ itself from popular religion since the Han dynasty.

According the way of *a priori*, an official religion would need official beliefs and rites stipulated by the State. Religious rites were carried out by the emperor, the top-ranked mandarins, and the heads of localities. There was, however, a common point between the official religion and popular religion: the veneration of ancestors. This was not the privilege of any specific social class. It was the right and responsibility of the head of a family and the kin, who was a man, according to regulations and customs. This can also be considered one of important factors that help identifying Confucianism as a religion.

3. Fundamental concepts and viewpoints of the official religion

Heaven - mankind Interactions: The idea of the interdependence between the cosmos with its active energy and the human behaviours is the focal point of the official religion. This idea was developed since the 2nd century BC and was the most important conception in the Confucius' writings.

The idea that explains the interdependence between Heaven and Mankind is the fundamental concept of Confucianism. This is the relationship between the nature and ethical reasoning. It is minimized into the viewpoint of Three Pillars, including: the Heaven which covers and produces; the Earth which bears and nurtures; and Mankind which is given birth by the Heaven, nurtured by the Earth, and endowed with capacity of thinking and awareness. In this doctrine, Mankind is not made from individuals but the general idea of human beings represented by the emperor as the only son of the Heaven, and by the title of the year of reign and national titles of dynasties.

The Son of Heaven used proper *rites (li)* to rule over his people. A man who acted according to *li* would be seen as a person with humanness (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*). These two were fundamental ethics. Confucius always complimented humanness and righteousness. Humaneness was the beginning of all good deeds. Through humanness and righteousness, the emperor maintained harmonious relationship with Heaven and this harmonious relationship was created through the proper order between the nature and human actions. The ultimate humanness

and righteousness made foundations and were constant in every emperor's behaviour. This was compulsory to the emperor. It defined the strong religious characteristic on the Son of Heaven through ancestor worship, seasonal rituals which were especially important in an agriculture-based nation. With these ethical humanness and righteousness, the emperor became a medium between Heaven and Earth. These two ethical standards made his image really shiny in the eye of his people. Thus, these two ethical standards were magically granted for the emperor by the Heaven. Thanked to this grant, the emperor led his people's ethical behaviours to conform the Heaven-Earth harmony so as to build peace and prosperity. Confucius said: "The ethics of the gentleman is like the wind, the ethics of the moron is like the grass. Wind blow over the grass and the grass has to bend to follow the wind"².

Ruling by humanness and righteousness, the emperor was supposed to be able to monitor rain and wind so as to bring about good harvest thus people though being unhappy would do no uprising. If not, there would appear omens such as drought, flood, bad crops, and deprivation. Consequently, people would not obey the emperor's commands and stand up to replace the throne. In this sense, the emperor was the pillar of the nature and the mankind's mandate.

The Mandate of Heaven: There was a clear connection between the concept of Heaven-mankind interaction and the concept of the Mandate of Heaven. The emperor, though crowned by making war, by inheritance, or by transference, according to the Mandate of Heaven, had the great responsibility of establishing a good order between the nature and the mankind through his ethics. With the Mandate of Heaven, the emperor had the ultimate power, possessed a supernatural and special religious position. However, there were rational aspects in religious trends in China. The Mandate of Heaven was not permanent; it became eroded like ethics of the mankind during the course of time. Successors of the throne would take the task of re-establish ethics which had been eroded during the predecessors. The winner of the struggle for the throne would often received good omens of the degradation of the contemporary ruler. The good omens told the winner that he would be recognized by the Heaven and his victory was planned before. The unusual natural phenomena were signs of the Heaven's anger, also meant the granted Mandate of Heaven was being taken back. Those phenomena foretold the ending of the ruling

reign yet revealed the transference of the Mandate of Heaven to the new emperor who would begin a new era of harmony and prosperity. Many times in the history, many emperors blamed themselves for the lack of ethics which resulted in sufferings and fear for the nation and its people because they believed that natural disasters caused by the anger of the unsatisfied Heaven. It was also evident that many scholar-mandarins wanted to solely justify the unusual natural phenomena in favour of their own interests and asked for punishment on those who would seek to explain the phenomena differently.

Because of its temporality, the Mandate of Heaven was also used to explain the legitimacy of the grassroots' uprisings against the ruling dynasty whose ethics had been eroded. Mencius justified the Zhou founders' rebellion against the last king of the Shang Dynasty by stating that the Shang king's bad conducts had actually reduced him to the status of a commoner. He said: "I have merely heard of killing a villain Zhou, but I have not heard of murdering [him as] the ruler"³. This was the only time in China there appeared advocacy for the grassroots' uprising, until the era of the People Republic of China.

The temporality of the Mandate of Heaven advocated for the legitimacy of the creator of the new dynasty since the Han regardless that one had a noble origin or not. The one who had the Mandate of Heaven that granted by the Heaven would be crowned. The grassroots always accepted the idea of the Mandate of Heaven. This idea represented the unchanged foundation of the state religion in accordance with the concept of Heaven-Mankind interactions.

Heaven, Earth, Mankind: Heaven (*Tian*) or the Emperor of the Yellow Heaven, in the eye of the Chinese, was the god with ultimate power. The concept Heaven related to the concept of Heaven-Mankind interactions and the Mandate of Heaven. "Heaven" ranked first in the Holy Trinity. Only the emperor could perform the ritual to the Heaven. The Heaven was imagined with the image of a form of human beings. However, Heaven tended to be presented by the Confucian scholars as an impersonal entity with ultimate power. Scholars did not present any real image of Heaven. They used wood tablets engraved with respectful titles for Heaven at rituals. Heaven was the concept that could be used to either refer to the nature or to the gods who rule the nature.

In the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1911), Heaven always represented the enormous sky that regulated the cosmos; the travelling directions of stars; weather and four seasons; and mankind's destiny according to an inner order. When the emperor performed the ritual to the Heaven (at the south of the imperial city), the ritual with music was an offering to the Creator and to praise His power. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Heaven was used up to 18 times to refer to will, behaviour, or feeling. When a disciple asked why king Shun had the kingdom, Mencius said that it was because of Heaven. Heaven did not speak but it simply revealed itself through deeds and affairs. Thus, everything was determined by Heaven.

The Earth stood second within the Holy Trinity, was the place of bearing and nurturing. In the ancient time, the God of Earth (*She*) was the local god, or the god of land belonging to each family, kin, and a part of a village or the whole village. The conception of the God of Earth remains until today. The God of Earth of the ancient time was arranged to be worshipped from lower levels to the upper levels (worshipped by heads of dependent States and by the Son of Heaven). There was a God of Cereals, also named the God of Millet (*Houji* - the main cereal planted in the North of ancient China). This God was told to be the good God who assisted Emperor Ku in agricultural works (some said it was Emperor Yao).

Earth and Millet could be combined to be the God of the soil and crops or spitted into the God of the Earth and the God of Cereals. We can call them in one concept of God of Earth and Millet. The ritual to the God of Earth and Millet at different levels created favourable conditions to the solidarity of the soil according to the nature of the God. Rituals to the God of the Soil could be taken place by 197 BC when the first King of Han dynasty ordered local districts to carry out rituals independently. At the beginning of the Tang dynasty, emperor Taizong repeated this order: villagers were required to carry out rituals to the God of Earth, yet State officials were not allowed to take part in. Thus, there appeared worship among the grassroots within the frame of an official religion.

The ordainment for dependent States began with the hanging of a piece of soil taken from the Son of Heaven's Circular Mound Altar (*tan*) for the God of Earth. This platform had the pyramid-like form built on a square base. While the sky was imagined to be round, the earth was

thought to be square. The four faces of the altar represented colours of the world: the green in the East, the red in the South, the white in the West, and the black in the North. The piece of soil would be colored in accordance to the relevant direction of the dependent State taken the capital city of the Zhou as the centre. That piece of soil would then be installed into the dependent State's Altar for the God of Earth. The Han dynasty maintained this custom within royal kin and with persons of the great contributions to the dynasty. It lasted until the 7th century.

In 133 BC, Hanwudi, the first emperor felt the great values of Confucianism towards the power of the court, decided to institutionalize the God of Earth. From the Zhou dynasty till the time of Hanwudi, rituals to the earth, at different levels and scopes, meant the rituals to the male God which showed the dependent relationship of the head of the family on the land. Since the time of Hanwudi onwards, the God of Earth began to bear the female characteristic (Yin) so as to contrast with the Heaven which had the male characteristic (Yang). Hanwudi was much determined with this dichotomy.

In the year 31 BC, the Circular Mound Altar for the God of Earth was required to build in the North of the imperial city. Since the Qing dynasty, the altar was equipped with roofs and located in the North, outside Beijing. The Circular Mound Altar for Heaven was located at in the South, like the opposite arrangement of Yin and Yang. The worship of the God of the Earth was inclined with ancestor worship. First crops from family garden or fields were used to make offerings to ancestors who were believed to help preventing natural disasters. In association with the worship of the soil was the worship of Shennong as the God of Agriculture.

Mankind was listed third in the Holy Trinity and as mentioned before not referring to a specific person. The concept of a specific person did not exist in the official religion. The concept of mankind had a plural meaning, was abstract or likened to the personality of the emperor. Besides the emperor, there were persons who represented not by their family but by their wisdom, knowledge and attitude. These persons took part in the sacred power which would grant them high social positions. They were the block of scholar-mandarins. The block made up what was later called "people" by Confucians. The block was only the minority of the

population yet they dominated the court's administrative structure. They might revolt or secretly rely on a revolt to protest against an emperor who had lost the ethics. The masses neither participate in the State's authorities nor in the official religion. The State rituals were led and performed by the emperor or the high-ranked mandarins. The masses only passively participated in rituals.

Some other viewpoints: Besides these two official religion's principles including Heaven-mankind interactions and the Mandate of Heaven, there were some other less well-known viewpoints.

The concept of *Tao* (literally the Way, or the way of life) had a crucial role in the whole religious ideology and philosophy of the Chinese. Initially, *Tao* could be used to refer to the routines of the Sun, the Moon and the stars as indicated by the ancient Chinese. H. Maspéro viewed *Tao* as the ultimately supernatural reality. It was seen as an absolute and existed prior to eternity. *Tao* was the primary principle of all things, mystical and limitless, and could not be named. These ideologies both represented one of the underlying layers of the Chinese philosophy and had significant impact on Confucianism. *Tao* became the movement of the universe and creation. Unlike the presentation of Laotzu of Goodness and Evil of the celestial realm, Confucius and his disciples embedded ethical values into *Tao*. For the mankind, *Tao* represented itself as a way that the emperor and the court used to lead people towards harmony with *Tao* previously established by Heaven and Earth. *Tao* was pure and existed everywhere in all orders of the universe. Orders of a nation had to follow the orders of the universe. *Tao* revealed itself right in the reality on earth. Ethics was manifestation of *Tao*, symbolized by emperors' behaviours who were supposed to realize *Tao*. Those behaviours were defined and oriented through rituals to maintain connection and harmonious relation with *Tao*.

Tao as a self-governed principle existed before everything, a fusion of universal elements or of the two entities of Yin and Yang which eternally worked together. One Yin element would be followed by one Yang element and this pattern constituted *Tao*. Yin represented things that were dark, cold, shrunken, relaxed, and negative. Yang represented things that were male, bright, hot, extended, intelligent, hard, active, and positive. The earth was Yin and the heaven was Yang. Initially, Yin was used to

refer to the shadowed slop of the mountain while Yang referred to the sunlit slop. Like the concept of *Tao*, certainly the observations of Chinese farmers in the ancient times provided foundations for the formation of the concepts Yin and Yang.

All ideological, ethical, natural or human elements and things or entities in this universe relied on the dual and eternal existence of Yin and Yang. The son's reliance on his father was Yin while the father had higher morality was Yang, for example. Of course, that son was only Yin in comparison to his father. Likewise, the emperor represented Yang yet he was seen as Ying before ancestral emperors and Heaven.

The interchange between Yin and Yang created cycle of four seasons and relevant times for agricultural works. Yang increased from the Mid Winter and decreased by Mid Summer. Yin increased till its peak when agricultural works stopped and the soil would enjoy some rest thanked to taboos. This created time for women to do domestic works such as weaving. At this time, funerals or marriages were not allowed. Spring and Summer belonged to Yang when people were supposed to make intimate relationships and get engaged and when rice grew up, till crops came. This was also time for participation in wars according to book of the arts of wars. The Autumn and the Winter belonged to Yin. The Autumn, according to old customs, was the time for emperor to reinforce his power to fight uprisings or to give judgements on criminals. Trails for great crimes often took place before the Mid Winter. At those trails, the emperor would dress in funeral costumes, sit within chief mandarins, read the cases, and gave final judgements so that law executors could take notes and set up the final deadline for execution.

Despite conceptions of Yin and Yang varied from time to time, from dynasties to dynasties, since 5th century BC, all schools had come to a general agreement on the theory of these two elements. Up to present, these concepts still represent fundamental ideologies of Chinese philosophy and religion.

While the philosophy of Yin and Yang targeted explanations of universe's movements, the philosophy of Five Elements led to Five Ethical principles that justified the dynamics of the universe in more details. Each element kept decreasing and following each other respectively in an endless cycle.

Five Elements were mentioned in one part of the *Book of Documents*. They were Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. They interacted and reproduced each other according to the mentioned above order. In time and space: Wood was located in the East and represented Spring; Fire was located in the South and represented Summer; Earth was located in the centre and represented the focal point of both space and time; Metal was located in the West and represented Autumn; and Water was located in the North and represented Winter. It was also the order of time. Five Elements represented Five basic colours: Green, Red, Yellow, White and Black; Five tones in music; Five basic relations (emperor-servant; father-son; husband-wife; brother-sister; friend-friend) in the society; Five ethical principles (humanness, righteousness, proper rite, knowledge, and integrity); five rites at home, etc.

If a cross is used to illustrate Five Elements, then Earth will take the centre of the cross and four hands will point to four directions of the sky. If we divide the central point into four equal parts then we have a map of eight win-blow directions. Eight points combine with the central point make the number 9. All numbers 1, 2, 5 and 9 are considered sacred numbers by the Chinese.

However, Five Elements also controlled each other: Wood controlled Earth; Earth controlled Water; Water controlled Fire; Fire controlled Metal; Metal controlled Wood.

Concepts Five Elements as well as Yin and Yang are integral parts of and are always presented in the Chinese's religious reflection.

The talented persons were supposed to have unshakeable belief in Heaven and Mandate of Heaven. Many paragraphs in Confucius's teachings reaffirmed this. One day, Confucius had a training session of proper rites under a tree. A mandarin of the locality wanted to do harm on Confucius thus ordered his men to chop down the tree. Disciples worried for Confucius. He however said: "Heaven granted ethics to me so what can he do to me?" When he got into danger in the land of *Lou*, he said: "Because Heaven does not want teachings of the great kings lost, what can the *Lou* do to me". We can find many other parts showing basic religious concepts regarding a man's dependence on supernatural force which could set destiny for that man. It also means that such as force determines in advance success or failure of a single person. Ideas of the

Mandate of Heaven and of destiny appeared regularly in Confucianism. Even for the one who doubted gods and deities, the Heaven's designation of the Mandate and destiny would always be used to justify a person's biography and life events.

Like discussed above, *Y Ching* was both appreciated by Taoism and Confucianism. Confucius even criticised himself for having spent too little time for studying the book. He wished Heaven gave him several years more to fully understand this book. *Y Ching* ranked number one in the Confucianism's collection of *Five Classics* and *Four Books*.

Since the Zhou dynasty, on the one hand, *Y Ching* was seen as a book of metaphysical arguments. On the other hand, it was a manual for fortune telling. Basically, these two sides had no contradictions but supplemented each other. The *Y Ching* used a type of divination called cleromancy which produced apparently random numbers. Four numbers, 6 and 9, plus the two numbers in between were turned in to a hexagram. The 8 symmetrical hexagrams represented the shape of the universe and destiny of human beings through telling their fortunes and misfortunes.

The 8 symmetrical hexagrams was reality of all things that existed, represented by full and broken lines with random arrangements for different hexagrams. The full lines represented Yang while broken lines represented Yin. The lines tell us about changes within everything⁴.

Like Yin-Yang and Five Elements, these hexagrams represented the need to systematise thinking of supernatural world and human destiny determined by the Mandate of Heaven. Like guidance from the gods and Heaven (Tian), these hexagrams were used as random events to decide how to act in accordance to the Mandate of Heaven. The contents of China's 21 official historical records provided many examples of using hexagrams to justify political events.

Prophecies transmitted through time often were represented in hexagrams. The same thing happened to omens. Chinese regimes always paid a lot of attention to prophecies and identification of omens to guess the plans of Heaven and Earth. Confucianism's doctrines also mention of the replacement of a former dynasty by new dynasty through omens which would be read and decoded as good news or bad news.

The above discussions, though not comprehensive, shed light on viewpoints and conceptions of the official religion which has got enduring influences until the present.

4. Rites (*Li*)

All the religious activities, in which the emperor acted as the central point of Heaven-mankind relations, the Mandate of Heaven, ancestral worship, ritual performances, prophecies and omens. All these were tied up to rites.

Rites originated from Tao and manifested into ethics would be realized by mankind. The act of performing rites carefully was necessary to create and maintain harmonious relationship with Heaven. *Rites* should be understood as rites of ethical, rituals, and worship in details. *Rites* appeared since the ancient times in China and were considered one of the important characteristics of a gentleman. *Rites* and rituals were used to standardise all the aspects and attitudes in the public and private life of gentlemen. *Rites* was great ethics yet not for the grassroots. The grassroots were governed through laws. In this case, *rites* were made sacred and were a priority of the upper-class people in the society. Later, many arguments among Confucian scholars regarding *rites* took place, especially what related to Heaven, Earth and ancestors.

Indeed, *rites* as discussed above did not create emotions like what could be seen in ritual performance in Taoism, Buddhism, or popular religion. *Rite* did not accept the spiritual relation with supernatural forces. Confucius said: "Take care of the people's righteousness. Respect spirits but keep a distance". This implies that the practitioners should not seek the mystical integration with the world of spirits. The *Book of Document* also reveals the denial the interminglement between the two worlds.

It was said that the official religion just has the outer form of *rites* and did not represent actual religious spirit. Yet if we make a closer look, Confucianism's *rites* do not actually refuse devotionism. This can be observed in the worship of ancestors.

In sum, teachings of Confucius, his disciples, and famous Confucian scholars created the official religion or State religion whose core was the Heaven and eternal ethical principles of the Heaven-mankind's relationships. This can be seen as the return to the norms of the ancient

times, one form of the resistance to degradation of the contemporary social reality. Here, we can use the concept “Protestantism” to discuss Confucianism.

In Confucius’ time, Confucianism had rational reflections. Later, it became some kind of pure and simple agnosticism. Yet foreign researchers have found out that agnostic annotations only appeared since Song dynasty, over 1,000 years after Confucius’ death. Agnosticism did not exist in official doctrines by Confucius.

Hereunder, I would like to introduce some main rituals in the Confucianism’s system of *rites*.

Rites and offerings by the Emperor and the Court: According to the Chinese’s views, the emperor was the centre of the human world. In Confucianism’s doctrine, the emperor was lightened by a static star which had other stars moving around it. As standing in between Heaven and Mankind in the universe’s order, the emperor was responsible for performing rituals to Heaven and Earth and deities in the celestial realm. That stance was merged with his political role. There was a fact that Chinese dynasties did not make differ philosophical ideologies from theology. There was no difference between religion and reality imposed by the State’s interests.

Therefore, the most important religious activities such as rituals to Heaven, Gods of Earth and God of Agriculture after Mid Winter were only performed by the emperor. The emperor, as the ultimate master, had the right to establish and issue annual calendars, to entitle gods and deities. Some main rituals are as follow:

Mid-Winter Ritual: The mid-Winter day was considered the time for the rise of Yang energy (*qi*) and signs of the Spring to come. The emperor performed a great ritual to the Heavenly Emperor. This ritual was noted in *The Book of Rites* as the continuance of religion of the ancient China. This ritual was performed until the establishment of the People Republic of China.

This ritual was called “Communication from the South” (Yuanqiutan) because it was performed in the South of the imperial city. The South is the direction of the Yang energy. The land for building a circular altar for this ritual was located outside the Walls, next to the road that divided the imperial city into two half.

The land had the shape of the rectangle, surrounded by walls, and was about 6-7 square kilometers. Inside, trees such as pines, firs, and forestry plants were planted, along with meadows for raising animals for sacrifice. A circular mound altar, called Southern Circular Mound Altar (*Yuanqiutan*) was built to be the centre for the whole site and the tablet for Heaven would be placed here. This Altar was built with white marble, 4 meters high, with three-layered terraces. The highest terrace was 30 meters wide and the lowest terrace was 70 meters wide. The three terraces were placed on a square base which symbolized the Earth.

The emperor and top-ranked mandarins had to keep themselves clean. The top-ranked mandarins only worked in case of an emergency, were not allowed to stay with women or attend funerals. The morning before the ritual, the emperor would sit in a dragon palanquin carried by 36 men, from the Forbidden City to the Altar. The palanquin was surrounded by a team of guards in splendid uniforms, followed by royal music band, dancers, and spiritual masters who would frighten ghosts along the way. These teams were followed by ten elephants. Princes and high-ranked mandarins would be on their knees on both sides of the road. After checking the preparation for the ritual, the emperor withdrew to the Chamber for Purification. That night, before sunrise, the emperor had to arrive at the Altar for the ritual.

Before the emperor came, mandarins placed onto the highest terrace the tablet of the Heavenly Emperor that faced South (Yang) and on its both sides were tablets for previous emperors and queens to make sure that prayers would reach Heaven. On the second layer, there placed tablets for the God of the Sun, for Stars in the East, for the Moon, for gods of cloud, rain, wind, lightning in the West. On the tablets, one could find full names and titles of gods, of ancestors with their dates of birth and death. Since their spirits or souls were believed to be embedded, the tablets could be seen as “living things”.

The emperor dressed in his court gown, walking from the ground upwards, through steps towards the highest terrace. Meanwhile, the chief organizer of the ritual started the fire in accordance with voice commands from the conductor of the ritual. The emperor started to perform the ritual by planting scented sticks onto altars and act following the voice commands. The Jade Emperor and the souls of

ancestors as well as spirits were all invited. The emperor would make the prayers on the background music performed by the royal band. The music was composed by the Ministry of Rites, especially for rituals. The prayers in details were written in red ink on blue paper, read out loud by the conductor of the ritual meanwhile the emperor would be on his knees listening. Feasts were prepared solemnly and became sacred, energized by the Gods' power.

Finally, the emperor would say farewell to the Jade Emperor, gods and ancestors. Sacrifices, votive reports, silk, and offerings were all burnt out.

The ritual to the Heaven in the South of the imperial city is the highest and the most impressive ceremony of the official religion.

The Mid-Summer Ritual: The mid-Summer date marked the ritual to the God of Agriculture (Shennong) when the Yang energy began to increase. This ritual was called "Communication from the North", since it took place in the North of the imperial city. The north belonged to Yin completely. The land allocated for this ritual was almost a square, about 2 kilometres wide. There was a relatively high mound on a square base. On the altar, there placed tablet for the God of Earth, God of Mountain, and God of Water. In addition, there were tablets for local gods to illustrate relations with ancestors. Ancestors were also considered to have a role in creating fertility of the soil.

In details, this ritual at the Northern Circular Mound Altar of the imperial city was the same to the ritual at the Southern Circular Mound Altar. However, one different feature was that at ritual in the North, all offerings would not be burnt out but they would be buried instead into a hole, meaning that the God of Earth could enjoy them directly.

However, later within the Forbidden City, there appeared a temple for the God of Earth right in the front of the house for tablets of former emperors and queens.

The Royal Ploughing ceremony: The God of Agriculture (Shennong) was worshipped in the West of the imperial city, near the site of Southern Mound Altar. According to the ancient China's legends, this god ranked second in the Three Sovereigns (Fu Xi, Shennong, Yellow emperor). They were said to be the gods of the time for creation of heaven and earth. The God of Agriculture created the plougher and taught people the

arts of doing agricultural works. He in many ways had a very close relation with the God of the Earth and the God of the Millet.

The site for ritual to Shennong was 4 kilometre square, smaller than the site for the Jade Emperor. The emperor would choose any good day of the early Spring, between the 5th and the 18th to perform ritual to Shennong, followed by the ritual to ancestors. He would begin a new crops by an ancient ritual at which he would plough on a prepared piece of farm land with two cows. He would go forwards three times and backwards three times. The first three princes and high ranked mandarins followed the emperor as music was playing. After the emperor, princes, high-ranked mandarins, and servants would finish the land. Selected mandarins would then scatter millet onto the ploughed land. Cereals grew up on the land would be made into offerings to the Jade Emperor and ancestors.

Ritual to Wind and Ritual to Mountain: In addition to important rituals mentioned above, these rituals could be performed within the official religion. Sima Qian used up to one chapter in his *Shiji* (Records of History) and in other books as well to describe these rituals.

Despite of their very early history, these rituals only appeared in the public in the Han dynasty. Ritual to Wind and Ritual to Mountain were seldom performed. At the first time, Hanwudi did it in 110 BC and repeated it four times until 93 BC. One and a half of dynasty later, in 56 AD, an emperor of the Later Han performed these rituals. This was repeated two times in 666 and 725 by two emperors of the Tang dynasty. The last ritual took place in 1008 by an emperor of the Song dynasty.

These rituals had to be performed by the emperor respectively. The ritual to Wind would take place on the peak of the Mount of Tai. The ritual to the Mountain would take place on a hexagonal altar at the Mount Tai's bed⁵.

Mount Tai (one of the Five Great Mountains) locates in the heart of the Shandong province. For the Chinese, this is a sacred mountain located in the East of the nation where the sun rises and where Yang starts to increase. Rituals to Wind and to Mountains were performed to report to the Heaven and Earth about the nation's prosperity and peace thanked to the realization of endowed Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, these rituals would only be performed when the nation achieved wealth. In 595, the

emperor was about to perform a ritual to Mountain yet drought happened thus the ritual was cancelled. Later generations of scholars criticize him for loosing ethics.

Rites of Issuance of Annual Calendar: According to the *Book of Rites*, the emperor was required to establish and issue the annual calendar. Each year, the emperor would set up a committee of mandarins at the Court to do this job. Movements of Heaven and Earth, four seasons, fertility of the mankind, of the soil and of domestic animals were recorded and worshipped. Thus, Heaven -Earth - Mankind interactions and annual movements of the universe had spiritual characteristic.

Legends said that Yellow emperor, one of the Five Emperors, became an immortal because he created the first complete calendar. According to *Book of Documents*, emperor Yao requested his assistants to precisely calculate orbits of stars and inform people so that they could know when to do what. The part of “Moon’s command” in the *Book of Rites* regulated that the emperor would publicize the calendar of the next year by the third month of the Winter. The calendar provided important dates for agricultural works, the dates of rituals, and good and bad days. This calendar followed the Moon’s cycle to conform the Sun’s orbit, consisted of 12 months and each month had 28 days. In some years, one extra month would be added to keep up with the Sun’s calendar. Since the 2nd BC, the calendar was integrated with theory of Five Elements, Five colours, and Five sounds. Thus, after the major innovation of calendar in Hanwudi’s time in 104 BC, the Earth element and the yellow were considered a representative for the Han dynasty (because the Qing belonged to the Water element with black colour). The New Year began by the Mid-Winter day. However, this calendar was not the perfect one and continued to be adjusted by later dynasties, until 1911.

Other rites: Besides rituals performed by the emperor of the State, the official religion had rituals performed by chief mandarins of localities.

First, it was ritual to the God of the Earth and God of the Millet by each locality when the Spring or the Autumn came. The emperor would first perform the Royal Ploughing ceremony then inform the chief mandarins of locality and heads of village of weather, climate, and the selection of good days for agricultural works. Then a calendar would be issued to each village.

Mandarins in charge of each locality had the duty to perform rituals to gods with heavenly origin such as Sun, Moon, stars, rain, wind, thunder, gods of mountain or gods of water, etc. Besides, they had to make offerings to Confucius and pre-Confucian scholars. In 195 BC, emperor Gaozu of Han came to visit the grave and performed a ritual to Confucius. This was the first pilgrimage by a Chinese dynasty. Yet not until 442 was the first temple for Confucius built. Later, in each locality, a temple designated only for Confucius was established. If such a temple was built in the locality, it was called Temple for Study. If it was built in the imperial capital, it was called the Temple of Literature. These two types of temple for Confucius had a solemn place in local schools. The chief mandarin of a locality would perform a ritual at the Temple for Study at his first day in office. It was recorded that there was a phenomenon that Confucius turned into a god in unofficial Confucian books.

The emperor, on behalf of the Jade Emperor and in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven, had the authority to issue titles for local gods. This official standardization would be recorded in the court's books of rites. It can be seen here the court's concessions made to the popular religion in order to achieve solidarity through religion which had a great socio-political role. It was this conferment that let the State both interfere with the numerous forms of religious practices outside the official religion and control the scope of these practices.

Because of State's conferment, it can be said that conferred gods (in various forms) constitute a part of the official religion. These gods would enjoy offerings provided at public ceremonies. In a sense, the conferment can be seen as a condition for the god to exist. There were many legendary heroes, talented persons, good mandarins, and loyal women who were recognized and praised by both Confucians and ordinary people. Besides, the extraordinary phenomena associated with responsiveness were criteria for ordainment. Guan Yu can be seen as an example here. He was a character during the time of Three Kingdoms who performed the absolute loyalty to the Zhuo. His image was represented vividly through many centuries. He was worshiped as a god of bravery and loyalty. He was very responsive and in the Chinese's views a punisher of evils.

Another example is about the ordainment of tutelary god. This was the god who worked on the Heavenly court for the Jade Emperor and was in charge of laws. However, this god was also considered the god who took care of goodness at night. Further, he took care of prosperity and morality and assist people in their fight against evils. The god had many assistants. When a new year came, he would report to the Jade Emperor what he had done in providing people with ethical guidance. He monitored businesses on earth and the underworld as well. In each administrative unit, there was a tutelary god. A Tutelary God's rank was the same to that of the God of the Earth as basing on the court's administrative system. From the Tang and Song dynasties on wards, Tutelary God was legally recognized with a stable position in public rituals. Since that time, each locality would have its own temple for the local tutelary god. Mandarins who were just assigned a position in a locality would often sleep over the first night in that temple. It was said that, messages received through dreams at that night would provide clues for solving legal cases. This example of Tutelary God reveals that the Chinese imagine of the supernatural world through existence of gods in a hierarchy took the ideas of this-worldly State officials with different ranks.

(To be continued)

NOTES:

- 1 This legend revealed the fact that the later generations sought to make great persons sacred. This happened to Confucius though he was verified to be a real person. This could be linked to stories about Sakya Muni. Confucius was considered a superior man in tens centuries later and this also showed his position as a religious master.
- 2 In the part about "Yan Hui" in the *Book of Meaning*.
- 3 In the part about "King Hui of Liang", the *Book of Mencius*.
- 4 It could be mentioned here the famous King Wen's sequence and the discovery of hexagrams.
- 5 Number 6, like other even numbers, belong to Yin. All odd numbers belong to Yang.