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THE MORAL PRECEPTS OF CHINESE CONFUCIANISM AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of Chinese Confucianism on the Nigerian society. Confucianism is a Chinese ethical and philosophical system developed from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-478 B.C.). It is a complex system of moral, social, political, philosophical and quasi-religious thought that influenced the culture and history of East Asia. It emphasized the fact that human beings are teachable, improvable and perfectible through self-cultivation and self-creation. Indeed, the main idea of Confucianism is the cultivation of virtue and development of moral perfection. The extent to which this moral aspect of the Chinese Confucianism has influenced the Nigerian society over the years is the main thrust of this paper.

Keywords: Morality; Confucianism; Society; Development.

Introduction;

Today, China is one of the fastest growing economies in the globe. The Republic of China is one of the Asian countries. Thus, the Republic of China can be found in the East Asia. It has a total land area of 9, 571, 300 square kilometers, with the world largest population, about 1.3 billion people (Alamu, 2005).

China has used its size to great advantage. The People's Republic of China commonly known as China is the most populous state in the world

with over 1.3 billion people and about the third largest country. It is governed by the communist party of China under a single party system and exercises jurisdiction over 22 provinces, five autonomous, four directly administered municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing) and two highly autonomous special administrative regions – Hong Kong and Macau, its capital city is Beijing. Interestingly, the history of China has seen several epoch making developments. The history varied from politics to religion. While politics ushered in the era of ideological annexation that catapulted China to the present economic growth. Religion also has tremendously helped to shape and focus the way and manner of the average Chinese man on the street. Religiously, China has five main religions viz: Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Before these religions became entrenched in China, China was characterized by great socio-political unrest. The mighty Chou dynasty (1122-256 BCE) had degenerated into a system of loosely – bound feudal states that were engaged in continuous and interminable warfare, much to the peril of the common people². Occasioned by this tumultuous situation, “hundred schools” contended in China, and subsequent two schools of Lao Tzu – the old master who formed Taoism and Kung-Fu Tzu – Confucius (Confucianism as Latinized) gained prominence in China. (Alamu, 2005) Thus, Lao Tzu adopted mystical approach of inactivity, while Confucius adopted pragmatic approach in order to restore peace to the Chinese society. (Alamu, 2005)

Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism adopted ineptitude, camouflage and restore to nature as his approach to people in China of his days. However, Confucius (551-479 BCE) was a moral philosopher and a contemporary Buddha (560BC) and lived when the social conduct of Chinese officials were greatly corrupt. In the light of the foregoing, Confucius postulated “the way of the leader” or “the rectification of names”, which is also called “li” and the (jen) “perfect” gentlemen. By “the way of the leader” Confucius meant ability and the will to control situation coupled with the understanding of the implication of the name of the leader to get things accomplished appropriately (Obi, 1987).

Obi expatiates the meaning of the “the way of the leader” or rectification of names thus:

It lies in the rectification of names when the leader is truly a leader the minister truly minister, the teacher truly teaches, the father the son, son, the student, student, then-only-then shall society, be restored (Obi, 1987).

Indicatively, each name – policeman, soldier, priest, president, lawyer, tailor, servant etc contains moral implications which constitute the essence of that class of profession to which the name applies. The essence of the leader perhaps is what the leader truly ought to be or the way of the leader. In China today, Confucianism by virtue of its pragmatic approach to the society has supplanted the ideals of Taoism. Theodore and James have argued that Confucianism and its ideal essence of the way of the leader have persisted and laid an ethical basis for political, socio-economic culture of modern-day China (Theodore & James, 1986).

With these Confucian ethical ideals, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam became missionary religion complements. Song Xinning buttress further that:

Within China an effort is emerging to promote some of the principles from this Confucian order as a collectivist, harmonious alternative to the conflictual individualism of most western international relations thinking. (Xinning, 2001)

Chinese Religion and the Outside World

In essence, the encounter with the West as a result of religious zeal's and doctrines destroyed the Sino centric international society and required China for the first time in its history to come to terms with alien and externally imposed international order of religion. China was pushed from being an empire to being a state and from constituting the core to being part of the periphery Christianity with European culture, weakened the Chinese standard of civilization, and facilitated China integration. (Gong, 1984)

By the early 1900's Britain and other European countries had established zones within China that were under their laws, rather than Chinese laws. British control was also set up over Hong Kong and China was forced to open her market for trade. Japan also established its control over the island of Taiwan. During the period of the Nationalist Government under Chiang Kai Shek, China entered into the province of international relations, as an ally of the West, especially the United States of America. (Okpeh, 2009).

Granted the fact that China was trying to regain power by undertaking deeper modernizing reforms to outwit the West, European culture as couched in Christianity became a contending force to qualify for entry. Though, these forces reflected a mix of cultural arrogance towards other cultures comparable to similar Islamo-Centric and Sino-Centric attitudes and the necessities of interaction among equals, which required

certain standards of effective government, particularly the ability to meet reciprocal obligations in law. (Gong, 1984) It was also under this issue that international society was itself continuing to evolve during the 19th century, most notably by the rise of nationalism and the market as new institutions. (Gong, 1984) This was the background that made the emerging communist revolutionist to regard their country as a surrogate of the West.

However, the communist victory in 1949, under Chairman Mao Tsetung (also as Mao Zedong) brought a radical and drastic change to the Chinese political landscape. (Okpeh, 2009) The Communist Revolution in China marked a watershed in Chinese international relations and diplomacy. It brought to an end the years of humiliation under British or European imperialism and feudalism. The Communist Revolution brought China into a new period of independent foreign policy. (Okpeh, et al. 2009) However, trying to defend her strategic interest, China became increasingly isolated from the League of Nations. This marked the period that witnessed a rupture in alliance between China and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Interestingly, the amity with former USSR with China abruptly came to an end in 1960's in the international arena. Along with this was the non-recognition of the Communist Government at the United Nations, which exacerbated issues. The Nationalist Government was the recognized government of China and held China's seat and vote in the UN Security Council. (Okpeh, 2009)

Be that as it may, it must be emphasized here that China's seat and vote in the UN Security Council was given to the defunct Nationalist Government in Taiwan, because many governments gave diplomatic recognition for China to the regime of Taipei. (Gong, 1984) Zhang argues that after 1949 there was a two-decade period of alternation in the Cold War, despite the radical change, in which US containment of China and China's rejection of the West played into each other. (Yonglin, 1998) But even during this period, China developed extensive political and economic links, paving the way for restoration of both diplomatic relations with the West. Halliday and Armstrong note tersely that China's support for revolutionary movements in the third world and after the split with the Soviet Union was that of ideological competition. Halliday & Armstrong, 1993)

Historically, from 1970 China took up the state-based discourse of international society and downgraded the class-based discourse of its earlier years and subsequently, with the four modernizations' policy, abandoned economic self-reliance. China's return to engagement with international society was strongly driven by domestic reactions against the

extreme radicalism of the Cultural Revolution years during the mid-to-late 1960's which not only improvised the country, but also exposed it to serious security threats (Keene, 2002).

This evolution underpins the last period that goes from 1970's especially the late 1970, to the present. Here, it must be mentioned that "reform and opening up" philosophy was adopted with China's internal reforms driving a transportation in its relationship with international society based on the Confucian ideals.

"Reform and Opening up" remains the dominant idea in Chinese politics. In a sense, China picked up its pre-1949 project of integrating itself with international community on the basis of domestic reforms. But the parallel is not exact as Confucian ethics has been the basis for entering into public office, tax school, politics and economics. In the post 1970s phase, China has been operating from a Confucian position so that internal reforms now drive changes in external policy rather than being driven mainly by external pressure as earlier. The economic and political routes into international community have also become more open than they were before decolonization (Bramwall, 2009).

Chris Bramall summarises tersely the historical developmental periods of China to represent controversial and uncontroversial climacteric, marking as it does the close of the Maoist-era. (Bramall, 2009) According to him, early Maoism (1949-63); late Maoism (1963-78); Market socialism (1978-96); and Chinese capitalism (1996-2008) in all truth, however are based on policy changes occasioned and implemented from 1972-1978, which remained Modest. (Bramall, 2009) Sino-American trade grew slowly, and economic policy under Hua Guogeng from 1976-1978 was little different from that which preceded it. There are certainly important continuities across the 1978 divide, not least in respect of the process of rural industrialization. By late 1970's, orthodox chronology had already stuck to the Socialist Education Movement. This movement ultimately evolved into the Cultural Revolution, and it marked a watershed in Maoist thinking. This is because it signaled the abandonment of the Leninist orthodoxy in favour of a development strategy which gave as much emphasis to super structural transformation as it did to the modernization of the economic base. (Bramall, 2009)

Both China and international community have moved on with leap and bound. China put its own economic development as top priority and deduced from it the need for stability and continuity in its international relations both internally and globally. To this end, China has taken from

the late 1970s as steadily adapting to international community and incorporating with it, playing the diplomatic apprentice rather than the revolutionary in inter governmental organization from 1971 on, and mainly engaging economically.(Yongjin,1998)

Critically speaking, China in 1980 settled domestic affairs enough to allow it to engage politically with international community on a non-revolutionist platform. However, China was pursuing a moving target, and in danger of becoming alienated again as post modern developments at the global level such as human rights and good governance that created a new standard of civilization putting pressure on its quite successful adoption of Westphalia standards and institutions. Just as in the first turn of China's encounter with Western International community, China did not accept the need to westernize itself completely, but sought to find a stable and workable blend of modernizing reforms and Chinese characteristics. (Foot, 2006) It is glaring and uncontested to establish that there was an impressively quick shift from Mao's policy of revolutionary rise, deeply antagonistic to the Western-dominated status quo to Deng's policy of peaceful rise within the status quo.

Similarities between Nigeria and China

Firstly, China is a multi-cultural country like Nigeria. It is believed that China has a population of about 1.3 billion people, while Nigeria is estimated to have a population of 140 million people; both countries have a high propensity of ethnic violence. China like Nigeria attained her independence on 1st October, 1949, while Nigeria on her part attained independence on 1st October, 1960. In July 2009, both countries witnessed serious religious riots and both have a high propensity of religious intolerance. Secondly, Nigeria and China are trading partners, although, there are a high number of Chinese business people in Nigeria the same cannot be said of Nigeria businessmen in China. Remarkably, the Sino-Nigeria trades seem to benefit the Chinese more than the Nigerians, which is to say that there are more Chinese products in Nigeria than Nigerian products in China.

Religion, morals and the Society

The Chinese unlike Nigeria has used her religion tremendously to shape their society and it has virtually become their moral code of conduct. The act of corruption is so repugnant to the Chinese society that they have the Hara-kiri which is also most akin to the Sharia practice in Northern Nigeria where the amputation of arms and limbs are advocated for crimes in the society. The Hara-kiri is another pragmatic approach of the Chinese and has

actually acted as a check and balance on the Chinese society. The argument here therefore is that the Nigerian state that has so much in common with the Chinese needs a very pragmatic ideology the like of Confucianism to shape the society for today the greatest impediment to Nigeria's growth potentials has been linked to corruption and other societal vices like prostitution, armed robbery, human trafficking amongst many other moral decadences.

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