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Cheng Yu's Response to the Moral Crisis and the Modern Fate of Confucian China

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Abstract: Cheng Yu is a significant yet underexplored figure in modern Chinese history. His ideas on Confucianism were closely linked to three pivotal moments of crisis in modern Chinese history: The First Sino-Japanese War, the May Fourth Movement, and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The First Sino-Japanese War led to the Qing government's Hundred Days Reform, initiated by Kang Youwei in 1898. When the Reform failed, Cheng, the secretary of Timothy Richard, assisted Kang in his escape and became Kang's disciple. In 1906, he traveled to Japan to investigate the development of industries, manufacturing, and hospitals, but his primary interest lay in Japan's educational model. Cheng believed that China's education lacked moral advancement compared to Japan's, and he deemed it necessary to promote practical learning and moral education. Following the May Fourth Movement in 1919, he vigorously advocated moral instruction and hoped the government would establish Confucianism as the state religion. He believed it was the only way the government could preserve the country's culture and save China from imminent destruction. Cheng's ideas of Confucianism were emblematic of his era. In 1938, he attempted to reform Confucianism and promote Confucian moral education in the school system by cultivating the Chinese people's cultural confidence and national identity. Cheng's solution to China's moral crisis was a response to the challenging question of the modern fate of Confucian China.

Keywords: Cheng Yu; moral crisis; Confucian China; Confucianism



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1. The Crisis of Cultural Survival

In his monumental work *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, Joseph R. Levenson (1920–1969) contended that Confucianism in the late Qing Dynasty was inadequate to meet the challenges of modernization. Given that the monarchy and Confucianism were tied in a close relationship, the Confucian intellectual tradition could not maintain its significance, was relegated to history along with the downfall of the monarchy, and became a museum exhibit (Levenson 1968, vol. 1, pp. 3, 79). Numerous modern Chinese intellectuals have grappled with the continuity of Confucian knowledge and have framed their discourses within a binary divide between East and West, as well as tradition and modernity. The crisis in Chinese culture during this period was characterized by a simplistic dichotomy between conservative adherence to tradition and a more radical approach to modernization. However, the failure of various political reforms, military defeats, and social upheavals worsened the situation and pushed individuals to embrace radical modes of thinking. The crisis of Chinese cultural identity was further exacerbated by a trend that called for radical means to achieve necessary reforms, culminating during the May Fourth Era.

In 1979, Yu-Sheng Lin (1934–2022) critically examined the cataclysmic anti-traditionalism of the May Fourth Movement (1919), arguing that the inherent crisis of Chinese humanism lay in “the loss of the authoritative agent of ordering” (Lin 1979, pp. 20–21); therefore, the collapse of the throne and the absence of Confucius led to the prevalence of a social and moral anomie. Some conservative scholars of the time perceived the loss of authority as the survival crisis of the Confucian humanist tradition facing the impact of Western culture. This

situation echoed the late Qing reform movements, during which Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) advocated for political reform, aiming at China’s convergence with the modern world but inevitably conflicting with the survival of the Qing Empire. Simultaneously, they had to contemplate the status of Chinese knowledge, especially the Confucian tradition, in the modern world. Kang and Liang’s reform efforts following the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) were partly inspired by the work of Christian missionaries such as Timothy Richard (1845–1919) and focused on contemporary Confucianism during a period when Christian influence started to infiltrate Confucian ideas.

In the late nineteenth century, both Timothy Richard and Kang Youwei grappled with the ideological turmoil of their time and endeavored to reformulate and reconstitute traditional religion in response to the question of China’s future development. Richard saw the Christian faith as facing an existential crisis due to the challenges presented by the modern world and China’s ongoing modernization. His proposed solution was to position Christianity as the main religion, integrating into it the doctrinal aspects of various world religions and transforming other religions, such as Buddhism, into Christianity. In pursuit of this goal, Richard produced several translations of Buddhist classics, including *The Awakening of Faith* 大乘起信論 (Ashvagoshā 1907), as well as an English translation of the Chinese literary classic *A Mission to Heaven* (Ch’iu 1913), which was the first English version of *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (*The Journey to the West*). Through these efforts, Richard sought to “read Christianity in Buddhist garb” (Scott 2012, p. 66) and, in his “ardently provocative Christian interpretation” of a Chinese literary classic, to devise a “new religion” that would foster dialogue and mediate conflicts between various religions (Lai 2014, pp. 126–27). Similarly, Kang’s response to the religious and cultural challenges of his time was to regard Confucianism as a religion that could absorb positive elements from other religious traditions. In 1898, during the Hundred Days’ Reform, Kang proposed that the Guangxu Emperor 光緒帝 (1871–1908) establish Confucianism as the state religion, modeled after Christianity, with Kang himself as the leader of this organization. Katy Chow noted that Kang reformed Confucianism to fit into the Protestant category of religion and offer his political theology (Chow 2022, p. 29). The proliferation of pan-religious ideas reflected a trend of cultural fusion, with multiple cultures and traditions merging to create new religious systems. However, both thinkers affirmed a certain cultural centralism; in Richard’s case, Christianity was at the center, while in Kang’s case, it was Confucianism.

Influenced by both Timothy Richard and Kang Youwei, Cheng Yu 程潛 (c. 1867–c. 1940) was a significant figure in modern Chinese history who has not received much attention from historians. A brief introduction to his life and work is presented below. Cheng, a native of Changzhou 常州 (Yanghu county 陽湖縣), Jiangsu province, was a talented poet, painter, calligrapher, Confucian educator, and counselor for the local governments in Shangxi and Jiangsu provinces. At the end of the nineteenth century, Cheng came to Shanghai as Timothy Richard’s Chinese assistant and secretary, working for the Christian Literature Society in China. In the summer of 1898, he accompanied Richard to Beijing, and they may well have been indirectly involved in the Hundred Days’ Reform. After the failure of the reform, Cheng was sent by Richard and the British consulate in Shanghai to intercept Kang Youwei in the Shanghai Wusongkou 吳淞口 (which, located north of Shanghai, is the port where the Huangpu River merges into the Yangtze River). He was the one who helped Kang escape China when the latter was wanted by Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后 (1835–1908) and was in danger of being killed at any moment. It was at this time that Cheng became Kang’s disciple (Jing 2011, pp. 52–53), embracing the idea of Confucianism as a religion that could save China. Although there was no more material to support it, scholars have conjectured that Cheng was not a student of Kang and that Cheng helped Kang out of a spirit of chivalry (Zhao 2019, p. 137).

Cheng’s reflections on education and modernization in China formed during his days working in Shanxi at the turn of the century. In 1901, Cheng accompanied Richard to Shanxi, and in 1902, he helped Richard and Shen Dunhe 沈敦和 (1866–1920) establish Shanxi University. In 1902, under the guidance of Richard and Shen, Cheng founded the

Jinbao 晉報 (*Shanxi Newspaper*) and became its chief editor (Yao 1985, p. 47). In 1906, he was sent to Japan by the Shanxi government to study the achievements of Japanese modernization. This trip to Japan in 70 days (1 October 1906–9 December 1906) had a profound impact on Cheng, prompting him to reflect on the prospects of developing Chinese education and modernization, Sino-Japanese relations, and even the crisis of the survival of the Chinese nation and culture. In 1907, *Jinbao* added a vernacular newspaper as a supplement under Cheng's management (Zhao 2019, p. 138).

Cheng was one of the early literary figures in the late Qing Dynasty who took the lead in promoting political reform and enlightening public audiences. His proposals to the governor of Shanxi province in 1905 for establishing vernacular newspapers and promoting oratorical speech (*yanshuo* 演說), among other ideas for pushing social reform, received official approval (Anonymous 1905, pp. 26–27). He was an active proponent of new learning and reform in response to the crisis facing late Qing China and continued his efforts to promote China's modernization after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 and often advised local governments, including those of Shangxi and Jiangsu provinces, on how to achieve this goal (Zhao 2019, pp. 151–54). During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Cheng became a strong advocate for the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion, which he believed would rapidly modernize China and save the nation while contributing to world peace. Throughout his life, Cheng remained committed to his faith in Chinese culture. The two Sino-Japanese wars deepened his engagement with political and moral reform, strengthening his conviction in Confucianism's values.

As Cheng's trip to Japan profoundly impacted his views on Chinese modernization and Sino-Japanese relations, his travelogue is of great significance to our understanding of his later thinking on reform. Additionally, his advocacy of Confucianism as the state religion during the Second Sino-Japanese War and his reflections on the propaganda methods of the Guomindang 中國國民黨 (The Chinese Nationalist Party) and the nation's survival in the war provide important insights into his political and social thought. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze these responses' circumstances and details and explore why and how they occurred. By examining Cheng's thoughts on Confucianism and his remarkable contribution to the idea of Confucianism as the state religion, we can gain a new perspective on the modern transformation of traditional Chinese culture and reevaluate the mainstream narrative of revolution and enlightenment after the May Fourth Movement.

2. Cheng's Travelogue on Japan in 1907: Modern Education and Moral Crisis

Cheng, a prominent intellectual of his time and a Confucian scholar, exhibited a keen awareness of the pressing challenges confronting modern China. He was deeply concerned with the changes in contemporary society and the crises it was facing. Cheng proudly traced his lineage to the Cheng Brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), the distinguished Neo-Confucian masters of the Song dynasty, thereby positioning himself as a direct successor to their intellectual legacy. Along with other Confucian intellectuals of his era, Cheng was a fervent advocate of cultural nationalism, firmly convinced of the enduring significance of Confucianism as a means of addressing the challenges posed by the West and the modern world.

As a political intellectual with a fervent passion for change, Cheng actively sought to voice his opinions on the state of society. He established contact with several Western missionaries, including Timothy Richard and Evan Morgan (1860–1941), to consult them on a range of contemporary issues and engage in cross-cultural comparative studies. By the late nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries in China had begun to acknowledge the need for a material foundation to support the country's further acceptance of Christianity. This entailed a complete reconstruction of Chinese society to bring it closer to the modern foundations of Western culture. To achieve this, they emphasized practical learning and introduced Western scientific and technological knowledge to China. Cheng was deeply committed to the modernization and transformation of China and remained actively in-

volved in advocating for various reforms through newspaper articles and formal reports to local governments.

The crisis triggered by the First Sino-Japanese War galvanized prominent figures such as Kang Youwei to initiate the Hundred Days' Reform, which aimed to convert China into a powerful modern nation-state. This movement sought to emulate the successful Meiji Restoration in Japan; however, Empress Dowager Cixi and others could not be swayed by the reformists' arguments favoring Japan's constitutional monarchy and the necessity of change. It was only after the Chinese defeat in the Boxer War of 1900 that the Qing court was compelled to adopt "preparatory constitutionalism" (*yubei lixian* 預備立憲). The triumph of the smaller Japan over the seemingly much larger power of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/05 profoundly impacted the Qing court and the Chinese intellectuals, who began to view constitutional monarchy as a viable route towards modernization and strength. Thus, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War can be interpreted as a continuation of the resonance of the First Sino-Japanese War on the Chinese people. The Russo-Japanese War was perceived as a contest between two types of governing, constitutionalism, represented by Japan, and autocracy, epitomized by Russia. This war prompted Cheng's contemporary Zhang Jian 張謇 (1853–1926) to exclaim in a letter to Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916): "The victory or defeat of the Russo-Japanese War is also the victory or defeat of constitutional monarchy and autocracy" (日俄之勝負，立憲專制之勝負也) (Li 2018, p. 200). Cheng was dispatched to Japan to study Japan's modernization.

Against this backdrop, Cheng embarked on a journey to Japan to investigate the country's progress in modern industrialization, factories, and hospitals at the request of the Shanxi government in 1906. This trip profoundly impacted Cheng, particularly his views on the modernization of Chinese education. His nationalist convictions regarding China's survival and further development eventually reinforced his unwavering commitment to Confucianism. For Cheng, Confucianism embodied the essence of the Chinese nation. In contrast to the official envoys from the Qing court, whose visits to Japan were viewed as discredited, Cheng chose to travel to Japan privately. As he mentioned: "The reputation of our envoys dispatched to Japan had been deteriorating for a long time. Therefore, upon my arrival in Japan, I refrained from using that designation and instead falsely claimed to be a merchant." (我國遊歷官之價值，墮落已久，故在東避此名稱，托為商人之資格。) (Cheng 2016, p. 7).¹ While Cheng aimed to gain insights into Japan's modernizing efforts, he refrained from direct contact with Japanese officials. Instead, he visited factories and hospitals, conversing with entrepreneurs, business owners, factory owners, medical doctors, low-level local officials, and people from all walks of life.

Despite investigating various industries, Cheng was particularly interested in education. As he stated in his travelogue, "The purpose of this trip was to investigate industrial factories and hospitals. Although I examined them in detail, they were only the external forms of actual operations. When one delves deeper into the origins of these industries, no industry exists apart from education. Therefore, during my visit, I paid particular attention to the development of the education system and schools" (工廠醫院，為此行調查之目的。視察雖詳，然皆不過為辦事之形式耳。究其本原，無一不出於學校。故參觀所及，於學校特詳。) (Cheng 2016, p. 7).

Cheng's experiences during his trip to Japan in 1906 triggered his ideas on the modernization of Chinese education, and the visit also reminded him of China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, arousing his nationalistic feelings. In the aftermath of Japan's victory, the military bureau of Japan displayed the trophies acquired from the war at the Yasukuni Shrine and the Imperial Museum and distributed a few pieces to each city and prefecture for public display. The Japanese intended these exhibitions to motivate their people to support their government and military, while the Chinese viewed them as a source of great humiliation. Cheng wrote, "Nowadays, most Chinese who visit this country, from officials, gentry, businessmen, to scholars, either avoid seeing these objects or just run away quickly. These objects are associated with national shame. They were afraid of being embarrassed by the sight of it" (今我國來遊於是邦者，自官吏以至紳商學界，大都因有關於國恥之物，往往避道引去，或

見而疾走，懼相對之無以自堪也。)(Cheng 2016, p. 8). However, Cheng saw a different purpose in these exhibitions and visited them many times, hiring a Japanese photographer to take images despite visitors not being allowed to take pictures of the war trophies (Cheng 2016, pp. 8, 141). As a sophisticated entrepreneur and newspaper editor, Cheng had a clear motive for taking these photos and was well aware of the attention they would generate. He planned to print these pictures on a large scale to expand their influence and arouse nationalist sentiment among Chinese readers. The sight of the spoils of war that Japan had taken from China prompted a deeper reflection on the future course of China's progress. Despite recognizing China's defeat and disgrace, Cheng, as an adherent of social evolution theory, viewed them as a validation for the necessity to learn from the enemy and saw them as an opportunity for transformation.

Cheng accepted the law of "survival of the fittest" postulated by Social Darwinism, seeing the Japanese invasion of China as unavoidable and the absolute victory over the Qing government as undeniable. He argued that:

"Japan's modern education system has already been widely established. Its industry and technology are well-developed. The citizens of Japan, including students, soldiers, officials, and merchants, have been united into the most vigorous and compassionate groups. The economic decline of Japan after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) made it necessary to turn to either commerce with others countries or colonize them. Europe and the United States were far apart, and it was difficult to compete with them. Thus, Japan's attention was focused on its western neighbor, China" (日本教育既已普及，工藝亦均發達。學生軍人官吏，以至負販，均結成最堅固最善良之團體。日俄戰後，經濟耗竭如洗，勢不得不求殖民商業於外國。歐美遠隔，力難與爭。視線所注，遂並全力於西鄰之我國。)(Cheng 2016, p. 8)

In light of Japan's limited resources, Cheng acknowledged the inevitability of Japan's invasion of China. Nevertheless, he recognized the differing responses to modernity between China and Japan. "United in their superior knowledge and power, the Japanese sought to colonize our country. Conversely, our country responded to this challenge with lethargy and corruption, leaving no reason why China would not be destroyed. It is an axiom of universal evolution that superiority prevails over inferiority. How could Japan alone be blamed?" (彼以千錘百煉之學力，合而謀我。我以窳廢應之，不亡何待？優勝劣敗，天演公理。此豈能為日本咎哉！)(Cheng 2016, p. 8). Cheng observed exhibitions of war trophies in Japanese museums, which reminded him of China's failure and enlightened him on the potential outcome of a future Japanese invasion.

Cheng argued that the shame of defeat had an emotional structure that could provide the impetus for courage and national identity. Avoiding or ignoring war trophies, the symbols of Chinese defeat and humiliation, was misguided. The Chinese had to acknowledge their failure and confront the shame, as "knowing shame is the first step to clearing away this shame" (知恥乃能洗恥)(Cheng 2016, p. 10). In 1906, Cheng published his travelogue, which included images of the trophies taken in Japan. In its second preface, he contended that these Japanese exhibitions served two purposes. The first was to commemorate the Japanese victory in the First Sino-Japanese War and to justify its nationalistic expansion. The second was to inspire future generations to engage in a similar cause: participating in plans to invade China. Therefore, it was imperative for Chinese people to know about these exhibitions, learn from them, and embrace the nationalistic sentiments they elicited.

Cheng was acutely aware of this psychological phenomenon and aimed to leverage it. He stated: "That is why I cannot deplore a small shame that leads to forgetting a larger one. Nor do I dare deplore a personal shame. I must make this shame public and known to all" (不佞以此不敢更惜小恥，致忘大恥；又不敢更惜個人之恥，而必欲公此恥於人人也。)(Cheng 2016, p. 10). And he went on to say: "The loss we suffered in defeat, the weakened state resulting from reparations and territorial concessions, all led to the opposite of these imperial glories. How can we not feel a sense of shame?" (戰敗之損失幾何，賠款割地之削弱幾何，亦既購得此種種帝國光榮之變相矣。則人顧可以無恥乎？)(Cheng 2016, p. 10). Only by

acknowledging and understanding the positive aspects of shame could the Chinese people hope to cleanse themselves of the stains of defeat.

During his travels, Cheng discovered that Japan possessed a modern and well-established education system. Prior to departing for China, he conversed through written dialogue (*bitan* 筆談) with his Japanese friend, Motora Shibuya 涩谷元良, who served as the head of the education department in Tokyo prefecture. Shibuya replied to Cheng's inquiry regarding the purpose of education in Japan:

“During the Meiji Restoration, our Emperor recognized the importance of education as the foundation of governance and the need to disseminate knowledge and technology to the populace. Consequently, the country imported academic and material civilizations from Europe and America, which prevailed for a while. However, despite the intellectual progress, it was challenging to sustain the country's prosperity without a revival of morality. Therefore, on October 30, the thirteenth year of the Meiji era, the Emperor issued a royal decree on education, stating its reasons, and then set a general education policy that the government and the people embraced. As a result, our education system has achieved modest success now.” (明治維新，今上皇帝軫念治國之基端在教育學藝普及庶民，於是盛輸入歐米之學術、物質之文明。一時靡然向風。惟智識進而道義不振，則國家之維持難。於是明治十三年十月三十日，給教育敕語，明示率由，遂定普通教育之方針，官民傾意講究。今於學校教育稍可觀者，蓋由於是。). (Cheng 2016, p. 70)

The Imperial Rescript on Education, signed by the Meiji Emperor on 30 October 1890, was partly based on the traditional Confucian philosophy as found in the *Sacred Edict in Six Articles* (*Shengyu liu yan* 聖諭六言) by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398), the founding Emperor of the Ming Dynasty of China, and the *Sacred Edict in Sixteen Moral Maxims* (*Shengyu shiliu tiao* 聖諭十六條) by the Qing Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722) (Dairoku 1909, pp. 2–3; Yin 2017, pp. 47–48). Accordingly, the Meiji Emperor's rescript on education “gave great prominence to Confucian ethical ideals” (Keene 2002, p. 193). Shibuya further elaborated: “However, in education, knowledge should go hand in hand with morality. With the experience of other countries, your country could learn from the other's strong points to offset one's weaknesses and then to consider which one is appropriate” (然智識與道德須駢進，於他邦之事，取長舍短，以斟酌適要為宜。). (Cheng 2016, p. 70). Shibuya's observations inspired Cheng, providing him with direction for finding a solution to the crisis in China.

An analysis of Cheng's travelogues and other relevant sources suggests that his knowledge of Japanese religion was superficial, which made it difficult to evaluate how he understood Japanese Shintoism's role in shaping the nation's spirit. During his visits to Yasukuni Shrine and other shrines (Cheng 2016, pp. 14, 73, 166), Cheng merely noted the various festivities, the worship of war heroes, and the display of trophies, which suggests that he only considered the religious tendencies of Japanese customs and the martial spirit of the nation. He was more concerned with the importance of the moral life, as emphasized by the Japanese government and scholars. Cheng was pleased to learn that Japanese scholars venerated Confucius and were seriously studying Confucianism. He often expressed sadness that Confucianism and Confucius were no longer respected in China but were held in high esteem in Japan, which convinced him that the value system of Confucianism played a valuable role in contemporary international politics. Cheng assumed that Confucian values embodied a kind of universality that would contribute to maintaining world peace.

Upon his return from Japan, Cheng was promoted to the rank of *daoyuan* 道員 or *daotai* 道臺, the supervisor of a special administration zone (*dao* 道) who was directly subordinated to central government agencies (Hucker 1987, p. 489). This granted him more opportunities to advise the government. In 1907, at the behest of an imperial edict from either the Guangxu Emperor (reigned 1875–1908) or Empress Dowager Cixi, Cheng submitted a proposal through the Court of Censors (Duchayuan 都察院) to promote modernization reforms, including constitutional reform. Drawing on his experience in Japan, Cheng's proposal was also serialized in several newspapers (Cheng 1907a, 1907b). The

Qing government promulgated *the Outline of the Constitution Compiled by Imperial Order* (*Qinding xianfa dagang* 欽定憲法大綱) on 27 August 1908, which was mainly modeled after the Japanese Meiji constitution and aimed to transform the Qing Empire into a constitutional monarchy (Hua 2019, pp. 29–45). While it is unclear how many of Cheng's ideas were adopted, his proposal included the establishment of a Confucian church (*Kongjiao* 孔教) modeled after the Catholic Church and the inclusion of Confucian rituals of worship in the Constitution (Cheng 1907a, No. 25, pp. 7–8). Cheng suggested that the government should “promote acts of respect for Confucius and emphasize national rituals in terms of music, odes, and veneration” (實行尊孔, 宜重以樂歌瞻禮也) (Cheng 1907a, No. 25, p. 7). In his memorial to the Qing government, he stressed that while worship of Heaven was a fundamental tenet of Confucianism, it was not enough on its own. He contended that the government should require all schools and Confucian temples to display ancestral tablets for Confucius and establish appropriate regulations. In addition, he suggested that Confucian temples and schools could take inspiration from Christian churches and hold religious ceremonies on prescribed days. During these ceremonies, students and officials would be obligated to perform the proper rites of worship towards Confucius and his disciples, as outlined in the regulations (Cheng 1907a, No. 25, pp. 7–8). This idea about establishing Confucianism as a religion was inherited from Kang Youwei and inspired later scholars.

In summary, Cheng acknowledged China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War and reflected on its causes and consequences. He urged his fellow Chinese citizens to understand the shame of being defeated while preparing for Japan's future invasion. Cheng believed that China needed to address the problem of moral decay in society through education, with Confucianism as the foundation of moral education.

3. The Aftermath of the May Fourth: Confucianism and the Modern Fate of China

For Levenson, Confucianism eventually became a museum exhibit, intellectually and institutionally dead, along with the demise of Imperial China. However, Cheng Yu saw Confucianism as a valuable resource that ought to be rediscovered and utilized to benefit China and the wider world. According to Cheng, the Chinese government needed to establish Confucianism as a guiding authority in order to effectively address social and moral challenges. However, he lamented that many radicalized youth failed to appreciate the essence of Western civilization and neglected their own cultural heritage, thereby disregarding traditional moral norms and contributing to a decline in societal values. He held the belief that the current crisis stemmed from the radicalism of the younger generation, who had been indoctrinated by false ideologies for an extended period of time (青年頭腦久已與不正當的學說弄得糊裡糊塗) (Cheng 1938, p. 3). Almost akin to being “slaves without a nation” 亡國奴 (or “conquered individuals”), they were brought up to perform various duties that could potentially lead to the downfall of their nation (養成了十足的亡國奴, 做盡了亡國的事實) (Cheng 1938, pp. 3–4). Consequently, in the late 1930s, Cheng reiterated his concerns that “the world is now in a state of moral collapse, with no one upholding ethics” (現在世界上人心大奔潰, 沒有一點道義), and further commented that “although everyone fears war, their motives are tainted by selfishness” (雖然人人怕打仗, 可是人人懷了一肚皮的私心) (Cheng 1938, p. 3).

After returning from Japan, Cheng advised the Shanxi provincial government, the Qing court, and later the Republic of China on the need for education reform to address China's moral crisis. After the May Fourth New Culture Movement, he opposed the anti-traditional views of the new generation of intellectuals. He urged the Ministry of Education to promote the “Reading Confucian Classics Campaign” to provide moral education to primary and secondary school students and familiarize them with traditional Chinese culture. Cheng's view on the importance of Confucianism remained steadfast from the early years of the Republic of China until the war of resistance against Japan's invasion in 1937. He proposed a three-step plan to save China, with the first step being the promotion of reading Confucian classics in schools, followed by the promotion of moral reform, and finally, the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion.

The concept of Confucianism as a religion may have first arisen among Chinese literati who came into contact with Jesuits in the 17th century. It was a response to interactions with Christianity. Similarly, Kang Youwei's ideas emerged in response to the crisis that Chinese thought and knowledge faced after the 1894 Sino-Japanese War. Cheng Yu's proposal to establish a Confucian church was influenced by Kang Youwei's ideas and his contact with Protestant missionaries. According to Chen Shouyi's study, Wang Qiyuan 王啟元, a late Ming scholar, was the earliest to propose the religionization of Confucianism in response to the Jesuit fathers' introduction of Christianity to China. Among Wang's contributions, "the most important thing was that he re-theologized Confucianism, making it an organic, revelatory religion rather than a mere philosophy of life or a system of doctrine" (Chen 1936, p. 135). Similarly, the missionary enterprise of Protestantism in China provoked Chinese scholars' efforts to religionize Confucianism. Kang Youwei reformulated Confucianism as a religion by taking "the model of Christianity as a politically active and organized religion" (Brusadelli 2020, p. 48). Kang believed that Confucius's birth was a divine appointment from heaven, intended for the salvation of China. He viewed Confucianism as a religion and proclaimed that "King Wen of Zhou was equivalent to God" 文王配上帝 (Kang 2007, p. 94), with Confucius as the savior and himself as the Pope of Kongism. His reforms were politically motivated and aimed at transforming Confucianism into a religion. In academic areas, Kang reinterpreted Confucian classics to support his claim that Confucius was sent by heaven to be the savior of China. Although his approach to Confucianism may seem similar to apocalyptic religious interpretations, Kang did not create a systematic theological framework. His Confucian religion centered on moralizing discourse, which he dressed in religious garb. Cheng faced a similar predicament, as both he and Kang did not contribute to creating new theological content for their respective religious beliefs but instead focused on political and moral discourse. Hence, their definition of Confucianism aligns more with a humanist religion (rendaojiao 人道教). Cheng had simplified the concept of Confucian doctrine by stating that it was a worldly law that taught people how to be humane. He had emphasized the importance of reading the book of Confucius and following his precepts in order to become a person and live in this world. According to Cheng, failure to do so would have resulted in human beings being no different from beasts (孔子之道，是入世法，教人怎樣做人，所以入世做人，就要讀孔子書，受孔子戒，不然他的人就是與禽獸無異) (Preface to the Ninth Edition, Cheng 1938, p. 55).

In addition to Cheng, a number of Kang's disciples supported the establishment of a Confucian Church and petitioned to constitutionalize it as the state religion. One of these disciples was Chen Huanzhang 陳煥章 (1880–1933), who received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Columbia University in 1911. Under Kang Youwei's commission, Chen founded the Confucian Church in Shanghai on 7 October 1912, and elected Kang as its leader. On 15 August 1913, the Confucian Church submitted a petition to the Senate and House of Representatives of the Republic of China, demanding that the Confucian Church be established as the state religion and written into the constitution of the newly established nation-state. This proposition was almost identical to the proposal submitted by Cheng Yu to the Qing court in 1907, when the Qing court was preparing for constitutionalism. Chen Huanzhang's ideas also came from Kang Youwei. As scholars have pointed out, in his writings, Chen "constantly used Western religious concepts to argue and prove that Confucianism was a religion, but Chen had to insist that Confucianism was a "special religion," that is, a humanist religion" (Li 2022, p. 14). Kang and Chen, as well as Cheng, reinterpreted and creatively transformed Confucianism into a Confucian religion and supported its establishment as the state religion in response to the crises of their time.

Although Cheng believed that modernization would bring material abundance to China, he emphasized the need for Confucian moral education in the country's educational system, even as China was learning from Japan and the West. In 1925, the question of whether students should "read the Chinese classics" sparked much discussion among scholars during the implementation of the new education system by the Republican government. Two main factions were involved in the heated debate, the New Youth writers,

represented by Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), and the scholars of the *Jia-yin Weekly* (甲寅週刊, 1914–1927), represented by Zhang Shizhao 章士釗 (1881–1973) (Zhang 2000, pp. 272–73). During this time, Lu Xun and other May-Fourth intellectuals fiercely refuted the scholars of *Jia-yin Weekly*. However, Cheng Yu stood in the same polemical camp as his colleagues in *Jia-Yin Weekly*. For Cheng, it was through reading Confucian classics that students could get a sound moral education so that Chinese culture could survive. He further criticized Liang Qichao, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), Lu Xun, and others for disrespecting traditional Chinese culture, which, in Cheng's view, led to the growing moral crisis in China at the time. Thus, Cheng associated the promotion of reading Chinese classics and the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion as critical to the fate of the country and the preservation of Chinese culture.

In 1925, Cheng Yu published an article titled “The fate of China depends purely on education” (*Zhongguo guoming chunxi jiaoyu wenti* 中國國命純系教育問題), in which he expounded on the relationship between the two (Cheng 1925; see also the earlier version Cheng 1923). Cheng asserted,

“In the past and present, no country, whether in China or the West, that did not respect its own education and culture could be established and continue to exist. Nowadays, Chinese and Western educators have different and extreme opinions about education in our country. Therefore, we should seek suggestions and consult widely before determining what can be implemented. Westerners often argue that China does not need to change its state system but rather the minds of its people to make progress. Education is the priority for solving the problem of changing people's minds” (古今中外，未有不尊重其國之教育文化而能立國者。今中西教育家對於吾國教育，均有極端主張，所當博采周諮，明定辦法者也。西人常言中國不必變更國體，但求變更人心，即可望改良進步，而解決人心問題，則首在教育。). (Cheng 1923, pp. 9–13)

With an explicit nationalist tone, Cheng argued that a nation must cherish its own traditional culture and use it as the foundation of national education.

Cheng believed that proper moral education could improve people's minds and sense of identity with the state. He held to the view that the Chinese classics, particularly the Confucian canon, were the standard for moral education. In his opinion, China must establish Confucianism as the national religion because he believed only Confucius could represent Confucianism, and only Confucianism could represent Chinese culture. Through this simplistic reasoning, he found a cultural resource that could compete with Western religion and culture and used it as a model for transformation.

Cheng's view that “China's national destiny depends purely on education” was inspired by his friend Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921), from whom Cheng also adopted the theory of social evolution. The two friends enjoyed exchanging ideas through poems, and their views on China's development grew closer through this poetic interaction. Yan Fu's ideas about Chinese education, particularly his linking education reform to China's national destiny, influenced Cheng significantly. Yan Fu was a highly prolific and influential translator who gained many ideas from his translations of Western philosophical and political writings. In around 1914, Yan Fu developed a close relationship with Alfred Westharp (1880–?), which also played a role in shaping his thoughts on education.

Alfred Westharp, a German musician, educator, and unconventional thinker, was invited to Shanxi province in 1913 to promote educational reform and teach in several schools. He was known as a famous “friend of the Orient” and adopted the Chinese name Wei Xiqin 衛西琴 (the last two characters meaning “Western zither”), later changed to Wei Zhong 衛中 (“Defending China”). As early as the 1900s, Westharp fell in love with Chinese culture while receiving his artistic education in France. He then traveled to England, where he embraced the pedagogical ideas of Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870–1952). Montessori created a new system of education based on the principle that each child's creative potential is their drive to learn and that the educator must treat each child as an individual. With a banker father focused on financial profit and a moody mother, Westharp's child-

hood was not happy. What Montessori's teachings suggested was what he had lacked in his childhood. The arrival of Montessori's writings in England in the 1910s generated much discussion, and it was then that Westharp was baptized into Montessori's ideas and became her disciple. He came to China in 1913 as a missionary propagating Montessori's doctrines and was warmly welcomed by Chinese intellectuals such as Yan Fu and Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988). Liang was a very important Neo-Confucian who had studied the philosophies of East and West from a comparative perspective. He considered Westharp his only important Western friend. As Gabriele Goldfuss has pointed out, Westharp, guided by his own pedagogical activities and some Chinese intellectuals such as Liang Shuming, aspired to participate in China's "spiritual renewal" based on its Confucian heritage (Goldfuss 1993, p. 94).

In 1914, Yan Fu translated Westharp's article "On Chinese Education" into classical Chinese for publication, which aroused much discussion in Chinese academia (Yan 1914). In this 40-page article, Westharp systematically introduced Montessori's philosophy of education, compared the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures and education, and presented Westharp's ideas on Chinese education. A number of intellectuals responded to Westharp's ideas, including Cheng Yu, who found them close to his own. From 1913 to 1925, Westharp worked on educational reform experiments in Shanxi, and Cheng Yu, who was also active in advising the Shanxi government on education, likely had close contact with him. After reading Yan's translation of Westharp's work, Cheng soon accepted Westharp's ideas on Chinese educational reform and Yan's further elaboration in his translation of Westharp's article. From then on, Cheng believed that "China's national destiny depends purely on education," with particular emphasis on Confucian moral education.

Cheng also criticized the radical anti-traditionalism of the May-Fourth intellectuals and its impact on the moral decay of Chinese society. He argued that the indiscriminate adoption of Western knowledge by scholars such as Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun, coupled with the elimination of compulsory reading of Chinese classics in primary and secondary education, were the primary causes of moral degradation: "The study of Confucian canons in the education system was abolished, some school buildings were confiscated, Confucian state rituals were cancelled, and the Confucian temples were rushed to destruction, which eventually led to widespread corruption among officials, as well as the shame of losing diplomatic power and national territory. Moreover, it gave rise to various bizarre discussions about freedom and emancipation. All of these unprecedented in the past" (乃者廢經不讀，學田橫收，祀事已無，林廟催毀，貪墨之案.....喪權失地之恥，自由解放之奇，為往昔所未見。) (Cheng 1938, p. 1). He regarded morally degenerate Chinese as "immoral beasts" and China as "the country of bandits and beasts" (土匪禽獸之國) (Cheng 1938, p. 54) in accordance with Mencius' discourse, which posits that the distinction between human beings and beasts is based on the presence or absence of the Confucian virtues of benevolence and righteousness (see the translation in Legge 1861, p. 201). He pointed out: "Now the whole country is in an uproar, and everyone is acting like a bandit, a phenomenon only found in the animal kingdom" (今茲全國汹汹，各恣其土匪行為，此實禽獸之現象耳。) (Cheng 1938, p. 40). He contended that all these radical activities of anti-traditionalism or anti-Confucianism would inevitably lead to a loss of cultural identity, and that without a strong sense of cultural heritage, the Chinese would find it difficult to create a necessary cultural and national identity. This situation could lead to an inevitable and irredeemable crisis for the newly established Republic of China (Cheng 1923, p. 9).

4. Confucianism as an Alternative Political Ideology

During the early twentieth century, scholars such as Cheng, who believed in Confucianism, were easily identified by the radical young intellectuals as conservative and backward traditionalists and were thus attacked in public opinion. From 1920 to 1940, Cheng developed a substantial body of work responding to those anti-traditional and anti-Confucian ideas. In the 1920s, he emphasized in newspapers the importance of education

to the newly established Republic of China and urged the government to establish Confucianism as the state religion to counter the surging tide of radicalism. In 1938, as China was already engaged in a war against Japan's invasion, Cheng was distressed to see half of China fall under Japan's control and was eager to see Confucianism become the state religion. He revised some of his earlier articles on Confucianism and published them in a single volume. The main thrust of this volume was to urge the Chinese government to prioritize education by establishing Confucianism as the state religion.

Cheng Yu, who had received a traditional Chinese Confucian education, was deeply distressed when he witnessed the new Nationalist government imitating modern Western educational models and abolishing Chinese traditional education. He believed that the newly established nation-state's longevity relied on preserving its own traditions and incorporating them into the educational system to cultivate a love of the country and its culture. Cheng recognized that a nation's traditional culture is the foundation of its existence and argued that China's traditional cultural values should be the basis of its education and the foundation of the Chinese nation.

In addition, Cheng criticized modern political parties, specifically the Chinese Nationalist Party, for not showing respect for Confucius and Confucianism. The official order of the Chinese government did not adhere to the established public rituals, which failed to honor Confucius. In imperial China, the emperors were advised to pay homage to Confucius at the time of their enthronement and at the spring and autumn festival celebrations. Confucius' elevated status, as shown by the emperor, provided additional benefits for maintaining his rule. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Chinese government required participants to perform the ritual of making three bows to the Chinese Nationalist Party's flag, the national flag, the image of Sun Yat-sen, and the picture or statue of Confucius, in that order, at significant celebrations. However, before paying tribute to Confucius, people had to sing the anthem of the Chinese Nationalist Party and recite Sun Yat-sen's last will in the Dacheng Hall 大成殿 of the Confucius Temple. Cheng saw this ritual as a farce instead of a tribute to Confucius. In the preface to his anthology, he noted that Confucius was a legacy of thousands of years of Chinese culture and the object of trust for millions of people, and the Chinese people naturally respect Confucius, unlike members of the Guomindang, who attempted to force people to worship their party leaders in a highly absurd manner (孔子蓋數千年信仰所留貽，數百兆生民所托命，尊崇之至出於人心之自然，非如黨人之崇拜其黨魁、強迫人之形式上極可笑之信仰所可同日語也。) (Cheng 1938, p. 1).

Cheng's advocacy for nationalism was distinct from the Chinese Nationalist Party's Three Principles of the People (*Sanminzhuyi* 三民主義), grounded in Sun Yat-sen's theory, which included *minzu* 民族 (nationalism), *minquan* 民權 (rights of the people or democracy), and *minsheng* 民生 (people's livelihood or socialism). Sun's theory transcended the recognition of the Chinese Nationalist Party and was accepted by most Chinese intellectuals. Sun's viewpoints later became the state ideology, and by denying them, Cheng risked disapproval from many readers.

Why did Cheng refute the national ideology represented by Sun's *Three Principles of the People*? This kind of ideological propaganda was particularly necessary for political mobilization when the nation faced foreign invasion. During the War of Resistance against Japan, Cheng Yu challenged the National Party's use of Sun Yat-sen's theory of the Three Principles of the People for political propaganda, proposing his alternative. Dissatisfied with Sun's theory, Cheng audaciously questioned it and developed his own idea of the Three Principles of the People based on three components: *minqi* 民氣 (people's morale, or stimulating the people's minds), *minshi* 民事 (people's matters, or matters of vital interest to the people), and *minde* 民德 (people's virtue). Among the three, *minshi* was the closest to *minsheng* (people's livelihood) in Sun's theory. Cheng provided an extended explanation of his concept of *minshi*, quoting Mencius' response to Duke Wen 文 of Teng 滕 (?–318 BC) that "the business of the people may not be remissly attended to" 民事不可緩也 (English translation by Legge 1861, p. 115). Cheng believed the government should "make the people live and work in peace and contentment so that the granary is solid and thus

people knows propriety, and the food and clothing are sufficient and thus people knows honour and shame” 使人民安居樂業，俾倉廩實而知禮節，衣食足而知榮辱 (Cheng 1938, p. 80). His concept of *minqi* aimed to stimulate the nationalist sentiment of the people and make them love their nation, which he believed would be enhanced by Confucian education. Cheng’s concept of *minqi* derives from Confucian discourse on *qi* 氣, of which the most crucial phrase related to it comes from Mencius’s description of “*haorangzhiqi*” 浩然之氣 (the vast, flowing passion-nature, or the flood-like *qi*). In response to Gongsun Chou’s 公孫丑 question about what he was good at, Mencius said, “I am skillful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature” (translation by Legge 1861, p. 65). *Qi* was the vital energy, according to Mencius, and it should be nourished with rectitude (Shun 1997, p. 75). A little earlier in Mencius’s time, *qi* was described in the *Guoyu* 國語 as something that fills Heaven and Earth, and its proper balance is linked to order in both the natural and human realms (Shun 1997, p. 67). Cheng further elaborated: “Without this vast, flowing passion-nature, which lies between heaven and earth, one can never compete with others in the arena” (若無此塞乎天地之間之浩然之氣，決不能與人角逐於競爭之場) (Cheng 1938, p. 80). The competition he referred to was the competition between China and others, with Cheng displaying a social evolutionary mode of thinking typical of his time. Cheng believed that loving and defending the country was the nation’s righteousness and the people’s highest moral requirement. Therefore, the Chinese people must cherish their culture and defend their country. In summary, Cheng grafted traditional Confucian terminology onto the current demands of reform, particularly the nationalist needs of his time.

Cheng’s discourse on the Three Principles of the People appeared in the final article of the above-mentioned anthology, titled “Some Notes on the Newly Published Biography of Zeng Guofan and Hu Linyi”. Prior to introducing his own Three Principles, Cheng provided a series of insightful recommendations. These included respecting traditional scholarship, promoting and supporting talented individuals, redirecting funds towards essential areas such as national defense and military weapons, recalling exiled individuals, reducing taxation, stabilizing people’s livelihoods, giving equal care to all people, and avoiding unnecessary sacrifice of lives and property. Cheng advised readers to learn from individuals possessing wisdom and moral character, explicitly taking the gentlemanly ideal as a guide for emulation. His suggestions implied that the intended audience was not the general public or ordinary officials but rather the country’s governing elites. It is likely that these proposals, including the discourse on the Three Principles of the People, were intended for Nationalist government leader Chiang Kai-shek. Cheng expressed similar viewpoints in another article in 1935 titled “A Letter on Education to Chiang Kai-shek”. In this open letter to Chiang Kai-shek, Cheng offered various suggestions for transforming the education system by adding Confucian moral cultivation. Cheng was inspired to write this letter after reading General Cai E’s book *The Quotations from Zeng Guofan and Hu Linyi’s Military Discourses* 曾胡治兵語錄. Cai compiled this book in 1911 while training Chinese soldiers in Yunnan. Excerpting military discourses by Zeng and Hu, Cai added many comments in his edited version, and after being published, this version was designated as one of the textbooks for all soldiers. In 1924, Chiang Kai-shek enlarged it, supplementing it with a new chapter on topics related to Confucian cultivation. Chiang’s edition became one of the textbooks for the Whampoa Military Academy. In 1935, when Cheng read Chiang’s edition, the book triggered him to offer many suggestions to Chiang concerning Confucian moral education. In short, the 1938 article responded to the 1935 article but with more emphasis on how to save China, as it was at a time of full-scale resistance to Japanese aggression. He rejected the National Party’s Three Principles of the People because he did not accept that this theory could save China, where people were morally corrupt and invaded by foreign enemies. He believed China’s only hope was establishing Confucianism as the state religion (Cheng 1938, preface, p. 1).

In 1938, during China’s critical moment of resistance to Japan’s invasion, Cheng’s advocacy for the adoption of Confucianism as the state religion faced significant criticism.

Cheng maintained the viewpoint that it was appropriate for the government to declare Confucianism as the official state religion and create institutions or organizations resembling those of Catholicism. Furthermore, he proposed the implementation of state-sanctioned ceremonies to conduct regular religious rituals venerating Confucius and his disciples (Cheng 1938, pp. 1–2, 76–79). Opponents of Cheng’s repeated proposal argued that, during a time of war and foreign invasion, ensuring the survival of the country should take precedence over establishing the state religion and promoting educational reform (Cheng 1938, preface, p. 1). However, they failed to recognize that Cheng’s emphasis on traditional values had the potential to mobilize Chinese citizens for the patriotic fight for the country. Despite facing criticism from his opponents, he maintained that reformation in education and a revival of classical studies were crucial for the survival and progress of the entire nation. He believed these reforms could only be successful if the government mandated Confucianism as the state religion, thus establishing a political ideology deeply rooted in the country’s nationalist tradition.

Cheng’s ideas on educational reform remained consistent over the decades, as evidenced by his edited anthology, *Records of Respecting Confucius Throughout the Ages and External Discussion on Confucianism* (*Lidai zunkongji kongjiao wailun heke* 歷代尊孔記 孔教外論合刻) (Cheng 1938). This collection comprises his revised, re-edited, and reprinted articles, previously published in two books. In the 1938 publication, the fifteenth printing of the ninth edition, Cheng listed the enthusiastic sponsors of its publication and indicated that the total number of printed copies was 37,000 (whether this number was an exaggeration is unknown). He transcribed remarks and historical facts about the veneration of Confucius in China, spanning from his death to the Republic of China. This compilation resulted in a book titled *Records of Respecting Confucius Throughout the Ages* 歷代尊孔記 (Cheng 1938, p. 1). Additionally, he compiled favorable views on Confucianism from non-Chinese scholars published in various newspapers and magazines in an anthology titled *External Discussion on Confucianism* 孔教外論. Among the figures who financed the printing of this book was a series of prominent Chinese political figures, scholars, and intellectuals. Cheng also cited a number of distinguished Japanese and Western scholars, each of whom offered a few words of appreciation for the benefits Confucianism had brought to China. They included Gilbert Reid (1857–1927), Timothy Richard, Reginald Fleming Johnston (1874–1938), C. Spurgeon Medhurst (1860–?), Alfred Westharp, Karl Fischer, Evan Morgan, Nagao Aruga 有賀長雄 (1860–1921), Jijiro Kuwano 桑野吉次郎, Naitō Torajirō 內藤湖南 (1866–1934), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), and others. These scholars were of different intellectual backgrounds, such as politicians, philosophers, diplomats, legal scholars, Sinologists, editors of journals, Protestant pastors, and Catholic priests. Cheng collected and edited their articles discussing Confucianism into one volume. The two books were combined and published together to support Cheng’s promotion of Confucianism as the state religion.

During the late 1930s, Cheng strongly believed that China’s new education system was flawed due to its lack of emphasis on Confucian classics and superficial imitation of Western education. Recognizing these flaws, he advocated for the importance of moral and modern scientific education, which he believed would restore China’s moral values and strengthen the nation. The system’s focus on new curricula mirroring Western education, rather than emphasizing the study of Confucian classics, led students to adopt radical views towards Chinese culture and tradition under the guise of “modern knowledge” based on the theory of social evolution. Cheng viewed this trend as a moral decay that threatened China’s national roots, potentially resulting in the extinction of Chinese culture and the nation itself (Cheng 1938, pp. 3–4). Consequently, he proposed establishing Confucianism as the state religion and recognizing both moral and modern scientific education as essential components. In his opinion, only Confucian moral education could restore China’s moral values and strengthen the nation’s resistance to invasions from Japan and other countries, instead of blindly adopting Western knowledge. Cheng argued against

the wholesale adoption of Western knowledge, believing it would not solve China's moral crisis but rather exacerbate it.

In short, Cheng repeatedly proposed the replacement of a political party's ideology with Confucianism as the state religion. He argued that Confucian ideology was more effective in fostering patriotic sentiment among Chinese citizens than the political dogma of any single party. Consequently, he advocated establishing Confucianism as the official state religion and promoting a political ideology deeply ingrained in the country's nationalist tradition. Cheng believed this approach was essential to the successful implementation of proposed reforms and critical to the progress and survival of the nation.

5. Conclusions

Throughout his writings, Cheng Yu frequently referred to Confucius as the "savior of China" (*Zhongguo zhi jiuzhu* 中國之救主) (Cheng 1923, p. 11). His advocacy of studying the Chinese classics and his efforts to establish Confucianism as the state religion came in response to three critical moments of crisis: the First Sino-Japanese War, the May Fourth Movement, and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Cheng's ideas were closely related to his role as a Chinese Confucian scholar and missionary assistant, as well as his investigations during his visit to Japan. Cheng's experience in Japan triggered his ideas on modernizing Chinese education and stirred his nationalistic feelings. Despite the humiliation he felt during his visit to Japan's exhibition of war trophies, it allowed him to contemplate the future direction of China's development. As an advocate of the theory of social evolution, he acknowledged China's defeat and humiliation as evidence of the need to learn from the enemy, seeing it as an opportunity for transformation.

During the time of China's struggle against the Japanese invasion, it became evident that the modern system of nation-states was more effective than religious institutions in rallying all available resources to face the threat posed by a foreign enemy. In Europe, the separation of church and nation-state was one of the main features of modernization. However, in Cheng's view, the fate of China's modernization depended on the modernization of Confucianism, which was established as the state religion. The objective of Cheng's advocacy of the Confucian religion, which resembles more of a humanistic moral philosophy than a religion as strictly defined in Western terms, was to cultivate individual and social morality through the compulsory promotion of the state system, with the ultimate goal of enhancing national unity and resilience against external threats. Therefore, Cheng's thinking on transforming Confucianism into a religion seemed somewhat arbitrary and unsystematic, so many of his comments were like propaganda slogans. His understanding of Confucian religion was not as profound as that of Wang Qiyuan and Chen Huanzhang, who utilized Christianity to reconstruct Confucianism systematically.

As Li Huawei has observed, "the consensus to exclude the Confucian church from the politics and society of the Republic of China was largely due to the involvement of key figures in the Confucian Church in the restoration of the imperial system and various activities to drive out history. This consensus also defined the place and role of Confucianism in the future construction of the Chinese state" (Li 2022, p. 19). Because of the notoriety of its modern appropriation by Kang Youwei, who established Confucianism as a religion for his own benefit, and Yuan Shikai, who used it to promote the restoration of the imperial system, the credibility of Confucianism was utterly bankrupt. Cheng's failed proposal, along with other similar cases, raises questions about the fate of Confucianism in modern China and the relationship between China's cultural traditions and its modernization process. The answers to these questions may not be readily apparent or easily distilled into simple or direct responses. Nonetheless, the insights derived from these scholars' experiences may offer valuable reflections on the potential of Confucianism and Chinese traditional culture to be meaningfully and creatively revitalized in the contemporary context.

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Note

¹ All translations in this article from Chinese to English are mine unless otherwise specified.

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