

Huang Xing and Traditional Chinese Culture

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Confucius is representative of China's classical culture. His sayings and thought influenced Chinese history for over two thousand years. Confucian thought long occupied a dominant position in Chinese society, in particular during the Song (960-1279), Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing periods (1644-1911). Confucius is respected as a sage teacher, and has been considered a paragon for emulation throughout the ages. Huang Xing 黄兴 (1874-1916) received a thoroughly traditional Confucian education during his youth, and studied systemically Confucius's sayings and thought, which he understood well. At the same time, while he was leading the revolution, he accepted the best aspects of traditional culture with a critical spirit. He himself was a devoted practitioner of the best aspects of traditional culture. He was renowned as a great man of the people with outstanding ethical integrity.

I. Receiving a good Confucian education from childhood

Huang Xing was taught to read and write at the age of five by his father, Huang Bingkun 黄炳坤. His first text was the collection of Confucius's sayings, *The Analects* (*Lunyü*). By the time he was seven, Huang Xing had already read all of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhong yong*), and *Mencius* (*Mengzi*), or in other words, the *Four Books* (*Sishu*). He committed the texts to memory and was able to recite them fluently. When Huang Xing was eight or nine, Xiao Rongjue 萧荣爵, who had been appointed *juren* 举人 (candidate for the Imperial Examinations), became his teacher. Huang Xing also read the *Five Classics* (*Wujing*), consisting of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), *Classic of History* (*Shujing*), *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*), *Classic of Rites* (*Lij*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*). At the same time, he listened respectfully to the exposition by Xiao Rongjue on the *Analects* and other Chinese Confucian classics, and succeeded in learning how to recite and write poetry. After this, he learned

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important principles through studying the *Four Books and Five Classics* (*Sishu Wujing*) at the home of Hanlin Academy scholar Zhou Liqiao 周笠樵. He also studied quite a few works by the pre-Qin thinkers, extended his reading to Tang *shi* poetry and Song *ci* poetry, and mastered writing essays in the contemporary style. Subsequently, Huang spent five years—from 1893 to 1897—in the Chengnan Shuyuan 城南书院 Academy in Changsha, where he continued studying mainly the Confucian classics. Letters are the shining attire of the literati. His calligraphy properly combined firmness and gentleness, leading people to extol him thus: “His writing is as beautiful as that of Su Dongpo 苏东坡; his Chinese characters demonstrate the technique of the Northern Wei calligraphers.”

From 1898 to 1902 Huang Xing studied at the Wuchang Lianghu Shuyuan 两湖 Academy, which combined the old and new learning. The school followed the educational policy of Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909), Governor-General of Guangdong and Hunan, and his motto of “Chinese learning for fundamental principles and Western learning for practical application.” A curriculum that taught simultaneously traditional Chinese classics and new Western learning was naturally somewhat different from a strictly classical education, yet at the core it did not depart completely from the Confucian classics. Therefore, it could be said that during the years between ages five and twenty-eight—until Huang left to study in Japan—he was always in contact with traditional Confucian culture. He was thus a democratic revolutionary who received a complete and systematic Confucian cultural education. In this respect, he was quite dissimilar to Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), who could only recite some phrases from the Chinese classics in spite of having spent several years studying at a village school before the age of thirteen. Sun lacked understanding of the content. From the age of thirteen he followed his mother to Honolulu, after which he received a completely Westernized education.

II. The first person who proposed to revitalize traditional culture after the establishment of the Republic

After the 1911 Revolution, the old autocratic system of rule was overthrown, and the first democratic republic in Asia was founded. The Republic brought great liberation to people’s thinking processes, but at the same time engendered some significant misconceptions. Thoughts were disorganized and social customs, both good and evil, were indiscriminately rejected. Many young people misconstrued freedom and democracy by using the slogan of revolution against the family unit. Some of them “used the pretext of freedom to not observe laws and regulations and to take advantage of equality to overlook culture.” Others regarded “the abandonment of parents to be

freedom,” and “the violation of laws to be equality.” Such excesses resulted in their “taking caution against filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, and trustworthiness” and “evading as illnesses rites, righteousness, loyalty, and shame;” therefore, “political orders [were] not to be followed, and moral principles completely discarded.” When Huang Xing saw these chaotic phenomena, he said that he was “extremely anxious;” he perceived these events as a grave social crisis, and that “verily, the damage caused by beasts of prey and flooding do not exceed them.” In light of these serious, harmful phenomena, Huang Xing sent telegrams to President Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 (1859-1916), Premier Tang Shaoyi 唐绍仪 (1862-1938), and Minister of Education Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), asking them to redress the situation. He also sent telegrams to every government-general, giving a new exposition of traditional moral and ethical views. He warned fervently against the chaos and requested that a general order be circulated to teachers in leading schools of all levels throughout the country to elucidate to students the new meaning of traditional ethics. In his telegrams he stated: “Don’t let fallacies become rampant, causing we Chinese, the offspring of the Yellow Emperor, to head mistakenly down the wrong path. To protect the country and protect our descendants, this is our only recourse.”¹

Huang Xing fully utilized the initiative of promotion of outstanding traditional morals during the building of a new order in the democratic republic. He devised new interpretations of traditional morals and ethics that were rich in innovation. Traditional morals and ethics such as loyalty, filial piety, compassion, and love had been misconstrued under the autocratic systems of rule since the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (206 BCE to 220 AD) periods, devolving into a staunch tool of autocratic regimes. Loyalty 忠 had been reduced to loyalty to a ruler; filial piety 孝 had come to represent simply piety toward parents. The fabrication of such fallacies “is a ramification of too many schools of discourse, which has obscured the true way. Rulers confine themselves to their own countries, and individuals to their own families. Even thieves usurp countries; even the wicked have households.” Ultimately, this leads to the disaster of “northern barbarians who usurp the throne, who are called capable and virtuous,” completely abandoning the fundamental meaning of “loyalty” and “piety.” Huang Xing emphasized that unless Chinese eradicated such delusions they would “lose respect for humanity.” The cause of such abuse “is not rooted in people’s respect for loyalty and

1 Telegrams to each governor-general 致各省都督电, May 22, 1912, in Liu Yangyang 刘泱泱, *Huang Xingji* 黄兴集 I [*Huang Xing Collection, I*], Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社 (Hunan People’s Publishing House), 2008, p. 371.

piety, but in their blindness towards the true meaning of loyalty and piety.”

Huang Xing formulated an incisive commentary on the true meaning of loyalty and piety:

Our country is the earliest civilization. Piety, loyalty, rites, and righteousness were the elements that built this country and then became the spirit of the rule of law. When it comes to loyalty, faithfully carrying out one's duty rather than doing servitude to rulers is called loyalty. This is what the ancients meant when they said, “when the rulers consider benefiting their peoples, the latter will die to repay their countries.” When it comes to piety, establishing oneself properly rather than being pious merely toward relatives is true piety.

On the anti-Qing revolution then current he said:

With all of their bodies and souls fathers instruct, and brothers encourage. No sooner has one fallen as a martyr then another succeeds him, repeatedly carrying out revenge for nine generations, bequeathing happiness on the closest relatives. At the level of country, this could be called loyalty; at the level of family, this could be called piety. Therefore, theories of political and family revolutions are raised to improve the polity; they are not mutually exclusive with the greater source of loyalty and piety.²

In November of that same year, Huang said in a speech at the Changsha Zhounan Women's School 长沙周南女校: “All who can do things in a serious manner can be called loyal. Just as the ancient (Zengzi 曾子, 505-436 BC), who conducted daily self-reflection, asked himself: ‘Was I loyal to my friends in making suggestions?’ —this could be called the true meaning of loyalty and piety.” Huang Xing not only corrected many fallacies and conformed to original meanings, but also reinvigorated the people with his new interpretations. He called the fulfillment of duty loyalty, and converted “loyalty to the ruler” into loyalty to the country, the people, and to each person's undertaking. This is very different from the original idea of being loyal to a ruler. He regarded “establishing oneself 立身” as being pious, and appealed to everyone to emphasize cultivating respect for work, and correctly attending to matters and receiving people. In this way, people would not be confined only to showing filial piety toward parents, but could also be directed toward

2 Telegrams to Yuan Shih-kai and others 致袁世凯等电, May 22, 1912, in Liu Yangyang 刘泱泱, *Huang Xingji* 黄兴集 I [*Huang Xing Collection, I*], Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社 (Hunan People's Publishing House), 2008, p. 370.

building a harmonious society to consolidate the new republican nation. In 1924, when Sun Yat-sen was giving his speech on “The Principle of Nationalism 民族主义,” one of the three pillars of “The Three Principles of the People 三民主义,” he also proposed the need to restore loyalty, piety, benevolence, and love. He called for loyalty to the country and to the people; this was a full twelve years after Huang Xing made the same argument.

After establishment of the Republic, however, the majority of young people did not understand the true meaning of loyalty and piety. They renounced loyalty, piety, benevolence, love, honesty, peace, and all other types of traditional virtues. “In schools young people do not treat their teachers as teachers, and in homes they do not treat their parents as parents. Such behavior brings immorality to the individual, and brings disorder to the world. Although this behavior may seem insignificant in the beginning, great trouble will arise in the future.” This called for serious attention and measures to prevent problems from worsening.

Thus, Huang Xing sent telegrams to the central government and to every government-general and requested that all leading schools at each level promptly correct the situation. This was a very wise decision. He sincerely appreciated the Shanghai Society for Regeneration of Inculcating Propriety 上海成立昌明礼教社 for their “research into rites and laws, and for assuming responsibility to improve customs.” Furthermore, he praised the Society for their “deep understanding of the idea that ‘everyone shares responsibility for the difficulty of the country,’ which is a consciousness I [i.e. Huang Xing] have been wishing to see since the Republic was declared but had almost given up the hope on finding.” He believed that society was certain to follow the correct path by “taking into consideration the opinions both for and against propriety and thereby fostering good customs.”³

III. A model for practicing outstanding traditional culture

Huang Xing’s “selflessness,” “sincerely honest” way of life, and “broad-minded” character were consistently admired. Luo Jialun 罗家伦 (1897-1969) highly praised Huang when he wrote in the preface of the book *Huang Keqiang xiansheng shu hanmo ji* 黄兴克强先生书翰墨迹 (A Record of Mr. Huang Keqiang’s [Huang Xing’s] Writings) that Huang “is an outstanding intellectual, a hero, a founding father; yet what is even of more importance, he is a scholar well-versed in Chinese culture.” This is an appropriate assess-

3 Reply to the Shanghai Society for Regeneration of Inculcating Propriety 复上海成立昌明礼教社, May 22, 1912, in Liu Yangyang 刘泱泱, *Huang Xingji* 黄兴集 I [*Huang Xing Collection, I*], Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社 (Hunan People’s Publishing House), 2008, p.373.

ment. Not only did Huang have a solid foundation in traditional Chinese culture, he also paid special attention to practice. In this respect he could indeed be called a model practitioner of Chinese culture.

First, in terms of loyalty, Huang was a sincere patriot who selflessly dedicated himself to the country and the people. His literary talents were exceptional. If he had been on the path of the old-style literati who “studied to become an official,” I believe he would have been promoted quite easily. Wealth and rank would have been his. At a time of deep, unprecedented crisis among the people, however, he discarded the road to promotion and riches in order to save the country and the people. He forsook literary pursuits to participate in the military revolution against the Qing government, and trod a path filled with potential danger in order to save the country. He sold off the vast property bequeathed him by his ancestors, and used the funds for the revolution. He didn’t begrudge sacrificing his life for the country. He made great effort during his lifetime to achieve this goal, not only offering himself up to save the country and the people, but even committing his oldest son to the revolution. When Huang was directing operations during the raging war on the front lines of Hanyang he wrote a letter to his son, who was in the middle of a military assault on Nanjing. There were only eight words in the letter: “My beloved son, Yi’ou—kill, kill the enemy!” What devoted patriotic nobility!

Throughout his life, his remarks and actions were all premised on benefiting the country and making the people happy. Thus, not only was he a patriot, but in every respect he was concerned about the suffering of the common people. On September 18, 1912, he emphasized to the welcome party of the Beijing Socialist Party that not only is this revolution in our country a kind of ethnic revolution or a political revolution, it is also in effect a social revolution....Since the political revolution is now complete, our outlook shall soon broaden; we shall eliminate egoism, and destroy all classes—the wealthy and powerful, the poor and lowly. We shall enable every individual in the country to live in complete ease and comfort.

On November 15 of the same year, he made another earnest appeal, this time to a welcome party at Xiangtan 湘潭: “this revolution of our compatriots seeks freedom and happiness. There are too many instances of inequality in the world, and the most inequality is between the rich and the poor. The poor work as hard as oxen and horses, and the rich are masters of the country. It is only through revolution that it is possible to have equality.” Huang spoke not only about eradicating inequality; he showed his concern for the plight of people everywhere through his actions. For example, when he planned to accede political power to Yuan Shikai at the beginning of 1912, one of his

considerations was to save the common people from continuously suffering the ravages of war. Later, he explained to the branch office of the Guomindang of the Americas: “Why didn’t I go to Beijing to fight against Yuan Shikai? Yuan had pretended to support the Republic, so we naively thought that the goal of revolution had been achieved. Moreover, our party used humanitarianism to exercise self-restraint. We couldn’t bear to go to war to push the people into such a plight again. That is the only reason we made Yuan president.”⁴

After the failure of the Second Revolution, Huang had to abandon the initial aspiration of “fighting to the death.” A major reason for his decision was his belief in Confucian benevolence and love. At that time he once secretly revealed his true feelings to a Japanese naval lieutenant commander named Akimoto 秋元 garrisoned in Nanjing. He told Akimoto: “What I very much regret is that because there are currently a variety of obstacles, Nanjing cannot be saved. We will lay down our lives here; this is what brings glory and honor to real men, and it is also what I want. But all of the officers under me oppose this. If I adhere to my opinion, it will make these young and promising officers die in this place in vain. This is also something I cannot bear. Not to mention the thought of the good, innocent citizens going bankrupt and losing their homes!”⁵ Before he left he also exhorted Chen Zhiji 陈之骥, who remained behind as commander of the eighth division, “You must maintain order in Nanjing. Don’t let the remaining troops harass and injure the civilians.”⁶ It isn’t difficult to discern between the lines Huang’s

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- 4 “The Second Revolution: Speech Given at the Commemorative Meeting” at the convention for the Guomindang branch office of the Americas 在美洲中国国民党支部召开 ‘二次革命’ 纪念大会上的演讲, July 15, 1914, in Liu Yangyang 刘泱泱, *Huang Xingji* 黄兴集 II [*Huang Xing Collection II*], Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社 (Hunan People’s Publishing House), 2008, p. 710.
- 5 Lieutenant commander Akimoto’s telegram to the military commander 秋元少佐致军令部长电报, excerpted from “Erci geming yu Huang Xing liuwang Riben,” 二次革命与黄兴流亡日本 in a sentence from Lin Zengping and Yang Shenzhi’s 林增平 杨慎之 *Huang Xing yanjiu* 黄兴研究 (*Research on Huang Xing*), Hunan Shifan Daxue chubanshe 湖南师范大学出版社 (Hunan Normal University Publishing House), 1990, p.89.
- 6 Li Shucheng 李书城, *Xinhai qianhou Huang Keqiang xianshengde geming huodong* 辛亥前后黄克强先生的革命活动 (*Revolutionary Activities of Mr. Huang Keqiang around the Time of the 1911 Revolution*), Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshanghuiyi quanguo weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, Xinhai geming huiyilu I 中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会文史资料研究委员会, 辛亥革命回忆录 I (The Chinese People’s Political Consultation Conference National Committee, Committee on Historical Document Research, Reminiscences on the 1911 Revolution, I), Zhonghua shuju 中华书局 (China Book Company), 1961, p. 180.

benevolent consideration toward the people and how much he was concerned about their suffering.

Also, from the point of view of filial love, on the one hand he sacrificed his family for the sake of the country and the people, so his relatives were forced to hide and relocate frequently. On the other hand he was also very filial in terms of how he handled his household, and never forsook the true nature of traditional culture. After his mother passed away, his father remarried. His stepmother was only sixteen years his senior yet he listened to whatever she told him to do. He treated her with the same respect he accorded his real mother. She smoothly made all of the decisions on household matters. Huang complied with all of her arrangements. Huang was so busy with national affairs that he did not write many letters home and even fewer remain. From the small amount of correspondence that is left, his true feelings of kindness and affection can be discerned. His wife, Xu Zonghan 徐宗汉 (1876-1944), had a daughter and a son by her first husband. They were called by the names Li Xiong 李雄 and Li Qiang 李强. He treated them as if they were his own children. In 1915 when he was recuperating in the United States, he received a letter from Li Xiong and Li Qiang. In his response Huang treated them better than his own child, saying:

With kisses to Xiong and Qiang. I did not respond right away to your letter because I had not recovered from my illness. I'm very sorry! I hear that you are doing well in your studies. The writing in the letters you sent me is neat and orderly. The characters are written in a good-looking style and are cute. If you can study harder in the future, Xiong, you will certainly be able to become a female college graduate. Qiang, you have to be equally studious as your sister and will thus naturally make obvious progress. Your younger brother, Mei 美, is growing up truly well, and would like to write both of you every day. He has learned a few English phrases; the phonetic sounds are clear and the meaning is understandable. He is your younger learning partner! Your grandmother is well; don't worry. Devote yourselves to your studies.

One of the most important notions in traditional Confucian culture is "harmony is invaluable" 和为贵. Huang Xing did an exceptionally outstanding job in inheriting and fostering this valued harmony. He held the principle of "no dispute" in dealing with people. He was most adept at enabling people to have harmonious relations with each other and to form groups. Zhang Shizhao 章士钊 explains his first-hand experiences in *Yu Huang Keqiang xiangjiao shiwei* (*The Whole Story of My Friendship with Huang Xing*):

There is no one in the world with whom it is easier to make friends than Huang Keqiang [Huang Xing]." "I befriended

him on the principle of ‘no dispute,’ but his spirit in this regard is even superior to mine. Besides the spirit of ‘no dispute,’ he assumes responsibility for doing all difficult things.

I am not so broadminded. Therefore, throughout my entire life, all of my dealings with Keqiang were enveloped in his kindness without my even being aware of it.⁷

Huang did his utmost to uphold unity among the revolutionist party members. Naturally, this was first a result of the historical lessons drawn from critical reports on the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion. It also had a close relationship with the traditional Confucian concept of “harmony is invaluable.” His relationship with Sun Yat-sen could be summed up as starting well and ending well, but there were also two conflicts. Generally speaking, during both of these conflicts, Huang Xing was on more solid ground while Sun was usually in the wrong, but in both cases Huang Xing made concessions out of consideration of party unity and for the public’s interest overall. In the early period there was a dispute over the style of the party’s flag. Time could be taken before making any decisions on it. Sun Yat-sen, however, was furious and rendered the situation unbearable for many people. This made Huang extremely unhappy; he even claimed that he would withdraw from the Tongmenghui. He quickly calmed down, however, and made concessions. This was most certainly a result of the far-reaching influence of his traditional ethics. He had the talent of “compromising for the sake of the overall interest.” Later, Sun Yat-sen’s requirement of personal oaths of loyalty and fingerprinting of people who wanted to join the Chinese Revolutionary Party and unconditional obedience to him alone to foment revolution, caused problems. This was a total violation of modern democratic principles. Huang Xing repeatedly advised against the order on oaths but Sun obstinately refused to listen. Thus, on the one hand, Huang could only adhere to his principles by refusing to join the Chinese Revolutionary Party. On the other, he went to the United States for fear that the problem would escalate. But Huang still tried to keep friendly relations with Sun by inviting him to his farewell party on the eve of his departure for the United States. After Huang arrived in America, he continued to advocate that Sun was the sole leader of the revo-

7 Zhang Shizhao 章士钊, *Yu Huang Keqiang xiangjiao shimo* 与黄克强相交始末 (*The Whole Story of My Friendship with Huang Xing*), Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshanghuiyi quanguo weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, Xinhai geming huiyilu 中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会文史资料研究委员会, 辛亥革命回忆录 II (The Chinese People’s Political Consultation Conference National Committee, Committee on Historical Document Research, Reminiscences on the 1911 Revolution, II), Zhonghua shuju 中华书局 (China Book Company), 1961, p. 149.

lution. He never once spoke about their dispute. This would have been difficult for most people to do. Huang was magnanimous and conducted himself nobly. He followed the Confucian teaching of “be true to one’s principles and benevolent in their application towards others.”

The philosophy of “harmony is invaluable” was also applied to Huang Xing’s handling of relations between the various ethnic groups in China. The establishment of the Republic ended over two thousand years of Chinese autocratic monarchic rule and ushered in a new era of a democratic republic. Yet at the time, strife among the ethnic groups of China was so serious that it threatened the unity of the country. Huang addressed the problem of ethnic unity by timely proposing an equal alliance among ethnic groups. He recognized that an ethnic alliance required equality among ethnic groups as its foundation, and “made the collective prosperity of the five great races of the Han, Manchus, Mongolians, Hui, and Tibetans its goal.” The Han, Manchu, Mongols, Hui, and Tibetans are all brothers without class distinction. Huang advocated eradicating old terms such as “vassal states” (藩属 *fanshu*), and implementing the essence of ethnic equality. “North and south are one family; brothers are under the same roof. Although there are twenty-two provinces, although there are Mongolians and Tibetans, they are all brothers under one roof.” He emphasized in his proposal: “The founding of the Republic of China is the result not of the efforts of one or two individuals, but of the support of all five races of our compatriots. Today China is faced with the imminent problem of foreign aggression; only when we five races become brothers of one heart and mind will we be able to rise to bear the responsibility in order to consolidate the Republic and to be able to enjoy freedom and happiness.”⁸ The notion of “great harmony” in Chinese history imparted Huang with a happy ideal: a borderless, race-blind world where everyone was equal and could get along. Together they would enjoy a happy life. That was Huang’s ideal. Therefore, when he was advocating his equal ethnic alliance, he gave the name of “Great Harmony Association of the Chinese Races” to the organization established to promote the alliance. Its goal was that ultimately “not only will the five peoples in the Republic be equal, but there will be a kind of ethnic and religious equality between them and other foreign races, thus forming a world of great harmony!

8 September 15, 1912; speech at the Hui Promotion Society welcome party in Beijing 在北京回族俱进会欢迎会上的演讲, in Liu Yangyang 刘泱泱, *Huang Xingji* 黄兴集 II [*Huang Xing Collection, II*], Hunan renmin chubanshe 湖南人民出版社 (Hunan People’s Publishing House), 2008, p. 496.