

Reconstruction of the “Great Unification” Concept by the Northern Confucian Scholars During the Jin-Yuan Transitional Period

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Abstract

The Jin-Yuan transitional period was the crucial turning point of the transformation of the Chinese nation community form. With the “reconstruction of Confucian orthodoxy” as their core thought, the northern Confucian scholars had achieved a political philosophical breakthrough in the “great unification” concept from the “mutual learning among civilizations” to the “consensus among civilizations” through the ontological foundation of the “universalization of heavenly principles”, the values cultivation of the “ethicalization of the kingly way”, and the practical innovation of “institutionalization of governance”. During the Jin Dynasty, the northern Confucian scholars promoted the cultural transformation through reforming traditional orthodoxy and integrating the traditional etiquettes and customs of various ethnic groups in the north. During the Jin-Yuan transitional period, under the background of the transformation of the northern, the northern Confucian scholars explored the ontological construction of the “great unification” through the method of mutual learning among civilizations. They had rooted in the concept of “Tao”, and transcended the debate between China and the barbarians. Thus, a new political philosophical interpretation of the “great unification” concept was formed. After the unification of the Yuan Dynasty, the southern Confucianism and the northern Confucianism were integrated together. The northern Confucian scholars exhibited a high level of cultural awareness and engaged in institutional practices from various perspectives.

Keywords

Jin-Yuan Transitional Period; Northern Confucian Scholar; Great Unification; Reconstruction.

1. Introduction

The concept of “great unification” originated from the pre-Qin period. Since Han Yu first advocated the theory of the Confucian orthodoxy in the Tang Dynasty, the Confucian scholars had provided the theoretical support for the political integration of a multi-ethnic country through the reconstruction and value interpretation of the essence of “Tao”. In the Northern Song Dynasty, Ouyang Xiu, Sima Guang, Cheng Yi, and other scholars discussed the “orthodoxy” based on the theory of the “great unification”, and merged the “great unification” and the “orthodoxy” theories into one. The Jin-Yuan transitional period were a crucial period for the formation of the unified multi-ethnic country. During this period, the concept of “great unification” had new development on the basis of previous generation. The northern Confucian scholars took the reconstruction of the “reconstruction of Confucian orthodoxy” as their core thought. Through the ontological foundation of the “universalization of heavenly principles”, the values cultivation of the “ethicalization of the kingly way”, and the practical

innovation of “institutionalization of governance”, the concept of “great unification” has been sublimated from the “mutual learning among civilizations” to the “consensus among civilizations”.

The current researches about the “great unification” concept had yielded fruitful results in the terms of historical verification and case analysis. However, these researches mainly focused on the analysis of empirical aspects such as institutional practices, and failed to achieve the philosophical sublimation that integrated the metaphysical and the physical. It was also difficult to show the complete process of the “great unification” concept from philosophical speculation to institutional implementation. In the today’s world where conflicts among civilizations are intensifying, the philosophical interpretation and practical application of the “great unification” concept not only involve the inheritance and adjustment of the “cultural consensus” paradigm, but also carry the mission of providing Chinese wisdom for the dialogue among human civilizations. Through the in-depth investigation of the theoretical innovations and institutional practices undertaken by the northern Confucian scholars in different historical stages via the mutual learning among civilizations, the clarification of the ideological reconstruction process of “adaptive adjustment-condensation and deepening-integration and finalization”, and the elucidation of the historical process that the “great unification” sublimating into the consensus among civilizations, the political philosophy interpretation system covering the ontological, axiological and methodological concepts of Jin-Yuan’s “great unification” is constructed.

2. Adaptive Adjustment: the Inherit and Develop of the “Practical Utility” Ideology and “Great Unification” Concept of the Northern Confucian Scholars in Jin Dynasty

In Jin Dynasty, the northern Confucian scholars had inherited the thoughts of Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu since the Tang and Song dynasties, emphasizing the practicality and secularity of “Tao” and advocating pragmatism. Facing with the political reality of the Jurchens occupying the Central Plain, the northern Confucian scholars had utilized the Confucianism to revolutionize the traditional China-minority nationality concept and orthodox concept, promoted the civilizational transformation of Jin Dynasty through the institutional reform of “transforming barbarians through Xia culture”. As a result, the political legitimacy of Jin Dynasty was resolved, and the status of the Jin Dynasty as a potential protagonist of the completely unified country was established.

2.1. The Transformation of the Traditional “Orthodox Concept” by the Northern Confucian Scholars in Jin Dynasty

In the early Jin Dynasty, the northern Confucian scholars established the status of the Jin Dynasty as the legitimate dynasty in the Central Plains by relying on the “vassal etiquette”. Han Fang, as an envoy to Goryeo, proposed that the Jin Dynasty was the suzerain country of Goryeo as Jin inherited the status of the Liao and Song dynasties. He demanded that neighboring regimes such as Goryeo should pay tribute and swear allegiance to the Jin Dynasty, following the ancient rituals of the Central Plains inherited from the Yu Shun period and Zhou Dynasty [1]. The orthodox status of the Jin Dynasty was established by utilizing the Confucian ritual and music system.

In the middle Jin Dynasty, the “Our Jin Literary School” emerged. The Confucian scholars of the “Our Jin Literary School” were born and raised during the Jin Dynasty. Their nationalistic sentiments and orthodox consciousness differed significantly from those of the former scholars of Liao and Song dynasties who were forced to serve the Jin Dynasty in its early stages. The former scholars still frequently called the Jin Dynasty the “holy (imperial) dynasty”

in their poems and essays. Wang Ji, a representative scholar of the “Our Jin Literary School”, called the Jin Dynasty the “holy dynasty” in his poem and required that Goryeo should yield to the the Jin Dynasty [2]. Another representative of the “Our Jin Literary School”, the Confucian scholar Liu Ang, regarded the Jin Dynasty as the legitimate successor of the Central Plains dynasties, and expressed his recognition of the Jin Dynasty’s orthodox status by the Confucian ritual and music ideas such as “ritual and music” and “clothing and hat” [3].

In the late period of the Jin Dynasty of Emperor Zhangzong, the north scholars such as Li Yu and Dang Huaiying, discussed the attribution of the Jin Dynasty’s destiny based on the Confucian concept of “the theory of the five elements and their cycles”. Li Yu believed that determining the moral fortune of the Jin Dynasty was an important path to establish its orthodox status. Although the scholars advocating the Five Virtues theory held different views and bases, their common goal was to use the “the theory of the five elements and their cycles” to construct the political legitimacy of the Jin Dynasty and seek theoretical support for its orthodoxy. In the late Jin Dynasty, Zhao Bingwen thought that there was no insurmountable gap between the Chinese and the barbarians. The two were interchangeable [4]. He opposed using the debate between China and the barbarians to determine orthodoxy. He implemented the “way” of China in political practice with the “mind of sharing the world” and established it as the orthodox standard. The orthodox views of the northern Confucian scholars in Jin Dynasty had reformed the traditional concept of “orthodoxy”, which made the “orthodoxy” break through the limitations of the distinction between Chinese and barbarians. The ideological obstacles for the mutual learning and cultural exchange among various ethnic groups were cleared.

2.2. Institutional Reform Promoted with the Ideology “Transforming Barbarians Through Xia Culture” by the Northern Confucian Scholars

In Jin Dynasty, the northern Confucian scholars expounded on the idea of “transforming barbarians through Xia culture” from Mencius. They advocated assimilating the Jin Dynasty rulers with Confucianism. Meanwhile, they also paid attention to drawing on and assimilating the customs and traditions of the Khitan and Jurchen ethnic groups. The cultural transformation of the Jin Dynasty was promoted through the establishment of legal regulations.

In the early Jin Dynasty, the dominator followed the customs and etiquettes of the Jin clan society. And the laws at that time were simple and crude. The northern Confucian scholars integrated the Confucian etiquettes, and the customs of the Jurchens and Khitans into the political life of the Jin Dynasty, thereby promoting the civilization process of Jin Dynasty. The “Huangtong Xinzhi” compiled by Hang Fang et al was the first law of Jin Dynasty. The compilation of “Huangtong Xinzhi” marked the integration of the legal tradition of the central plains and the customary law of the Jurchens into the national governance system. This standardized social order and strengthened the rule of Jin Dynasty. Therefore, the social order was standardized and the government of Jin Dynasty was strengthened.

In the late Jin Dynasty, the institutions and regulations were further improved. During the reign of Zhangzong (AD 1194), “Mingchang legal principles” was formulated. The “Mingchang legal principles” was not promulgated, but it laid the foundation of “Taihe laws” that followed [1]. It is widely recognized in academic community that “Taihe laws” is the most representative law in Jin Dynasty. The “Taihe laws” inherited the laws of the Tang and Song dynasties, while incorporating the customs and rituals of the Jurchens. It emphasizes the preservation of Confucian ritual and righteousness, reflecting the northern Confucian scholars’ national governance philosophy of “incorporating ritual into law”. The northern Confucian scholars improved the institutions and laws of the Jin Dynasty through cultural exchange and mutual learning among ethnic groups. The Confucian rituals and laws of the central plains,

along with the customs of the Khitan and Jurchen were all incorporated into the governance framework of the Jin Dynasty. The foundation for the reconstruction of the “great unification” concept was laid.

3. Concentrating and Deepening: the Transformation of Northern Confucianism and the Ontological Construction of “Great Unification” Concept during the Jin-Yuan Transitional Period

During the Jin-Yuan transitional period, the northern Confucianism had suffered from double blows. On the one hand, the academic tradition of emphasizing Confucian classics and dictions declined due to the Mongol occupation of the central plains. The northern Confucianism had lost its institutional support and faced a crisis of survival. On the other hand, the spread of Neo-Confucianism from the south to the north during the Southern Song Dynasty brought ideological impacts. The northern Confucian scholars faced dual anxieties regarding the “Confucian orthodoxy” and “governance orthodoxy”. In terms of theoretical interpretation, the northern Confucianism had fallen into trouble. Under this background, the northern scholars advocated exploring the ontological construction of the concept of “great unification” through the mutual learning of civilizations. They attempted to take “Tao” as the foundation, transcend the debate between China and barbarians, and constructed a new interpretative system of political philosophy.

3.1. The “Zhongzhou” Theory of the Literary Tradition Faction: the Construction of the “Great Unification” Concept at the Cultural Level

Yuan Haowen, as a representative of deserted people of Jin Dynasty continued the tradition of Jin-originated Confucianism since Dang Huaiying and Zhao Bingwen, emphasizing the northern “literary tradition” of “the unity of literature and Taoism”. During the construction of the “great unification” concept, the “Zhongzhou” theory was proposed by Yuan Haowen.

During the Jin-Yuan transitional period, the Confucian scholars of “literary tradition” faction, such as Yuan Haowen, put forward the “literary tradition” theory and emphasized the “unity of literature and Tao”. Based on the literary works created by scholars of the Han, Jurchen, Khitan, and other ethnic groups in the Jin Dynasty, they inherited and absorbed the civilization achievements of various ethnic groups in the north. Thus, the northern cultural heritage was reconstructed. The “Zhongzhou Ji” was named after “Zhongzhou”, which gained the concept of “Zhongzhou” the cultural connotations transcending geographical space. The cultural property of “great unification” of “Zhongzhou” was highlighted.

Yuan Haojian’s “Zhongzhou” theory developed the traditional concept of “great unification” from the cultural perspective, which was specifically manifested in three aspects. Firstly, Yuan Haowen’s “Zhongzhou” theory emphasized the inheritance of “literary tradition”, which was different from the cultural inheritance that integrated the achievements of various ethnic groups in the north. Secondly, the “Zhongzhou” theory emphasized the redefinition of cultural values, which placed the cultural achievements jointly created by various ethnic groups in the north at the core position of the Chinese civilization lineage. Thirdly, the “Zhongzhou” theory had a remarkable sentiment of loyalty to the former dynasty. “Zhongzhou”, the geographical symbol representing the common living area of various ethnic groups, carried the cultural identity of the northern Confucian scholars. By integrating the civilization achievements co-created by ethnic groups such as the Han, Jurchen, and Khitan in the north during the Jin Dynasty, the “Zhongzhou” theory shifted the legitimacy foundation of the “great unification” from blood ties and geographical proximity to cultural identity, providing a cultural basis for the legitimacy of the Yuan unification.

3.2. The “Legitimacy” Theory of Neo-Confucianism: the Condensation of the “Great Unification” Concept at the Ethical Level

During the Jin-Yuan transitional period, the Neo-Confucian scholars such as Yang Huan broke the stereotype of orthodoxy based on the concepts of “unify the world”, “mandate of heaven”, “virtuous fortune” and “literary tradition”, and inherited the Neo-Confucianism of scholars in the Northern Song Dynasty. Based on the Confucian concept of “Tao”, they interpreted the “orthodoxy” view through the “kingly way” regarded as the political expression of “Tao”. The Confucian “kingly way” was elucidated as the universal political ethical principle that transcended the distinction between the Chinese and barbarians. Early Yuan Dynasty, the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhao Fu greatly appreciated the theory of “orthodox kingly way”.

The theory of “orthodox kingly way” proposed by Yang Huan had achieved three breakthroughs in the traditional concept of “great unification”. Firstly, the “orthodox kingly way” theory that transcending the distinction between the Chinese and barbarians regarded the Confucian “kingly way” as the ethical norm for all political regimes, which provided a political ethics basis for the formation and development of a unified multi-ethnic country. Secondly, the “orthodox kingly way” theory refuted the traditional orthodox arguments such as lineage, region and the distinction between the Chinese and barbarians, breaking the concept that “orthodoxy” must be inherited by the central plain regime. Thirdly, the “orthodox kingly way” theory reconstructed ethical nature, which regarded the “benevolence policy” rather than “mandate of heaven” as the source of the government legitimacy. The core essence of “great unification” shifted from geographical integration to ethical identification. The “orthodox kingly way” theory provided the legitimate argument for the domination of Yuan Dynasty, served as the theoretical precursor of Kublai Khan’s implementation of Han law, and injected new theoretical connotations into the “great unification” concept.

3.3. The “State Governance Methods” Theory of the Orthodox School: the Distillation of the “Great Unification” Concept at the Ontological Level

During the Jin-Yuan transitional period, the Confucian scholars of the “orthodox school” such as Hao Jing, Xu Heng and others actively integrated the “Confucian orthodoxy” thought of Zhu Xi in the south and the practical tradition of northern Confucianism, and also absorbed the reasonable elements of the “heaven” belief of the Mongolian grasslands. They explicated the ontological value of “Tao” from the perspective of the integration of “Heavenly Principle” unity, and advocated that “Tao” was the fundamental source and driving force of the operation of all things. By this way, the universality of Confucian “Tao” transcending the distinction between Chinese and barbarians was further demonstrated. “Tao” was ontologized as the philosophical foundation of the “great unification” concept.

In the early Yuan Dynasty, Hao Jing, a representative scholar of the neo-Confucian school, materialized the “Tao” into the “discipline, propriety, righteousness, and morality” and “cultural relics and institutions” of national governance. He believed that the “discipline, propriety, righteousness, and morality” and “cultural relics and institutions” were the “vital force” and “lifeblood” for establishing the political order of “great unification” [5]. Xu Heng, the great master of the Neo-Confucianism in the early Yuan Dynasty, emphasized that “Tao” was the fundamental principle, and concretized the “Tao” into the “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues” of the ruling order [6]. He believed that the “key” to achieve the world unification was following the Confucian governance principle of “love and fairness”. The world unification could be achieved by the “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues”.

In the early Yuan Dynasty, the “state governance methods” theory of the Neo-Confucian school contained three philosophical dimensions of the “great unification” concept. First was the ontological dimension, which regarded the Confucian “Tao” as the ontological basis of the “great unification” concept. Second was the methodological dimension, which emphasized

that the ontological “Tao” needed to be transformed into the practical order through the practice of “state governance methods”. Third was the axiological dimension, which advocated the “love and fairness” as the core value of the “great unification” concept. The “orthodox school” consciously interpreted the “great unification” concept from the ontological level, eliminating the opposition between Chinese and the barbarians. The exclusivity of blood relationship and geography was replaced by the universality of “Tao”. Meanwhile, the “orthodox school” reconstructed the political legitimacy of the “great unification” through “Tao”. The foundation of the “great unification” concept was shifted from “heaven” to “Tao”, which provided the theoretical basis for the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty to establish a system framework of “integrated rites and customs”.

4. Conclusion

After the unification of the Yuan Dynasty, the “literary tradition” faction and “orthodox school” of the northern Confucian scholars had both divergences and mutual influences in their thoughts, eventually leading to their integration. In the early Yuan, the northern Confucian scholars absorbed the southern Confucianism thought. At the same time, they inherited the characteristic of the northern Confucianism that emphasized literary expression and practicality since the Jin Dynasty, thus forming a new academic system that integrated the Confucianism of the north and the south, and achieving the integration of academic traditions between the north and the south. In the context of the academic integration between the north and the south, the northern Confucian scholars advocated that the “Tao” was the civilization consensus of various ethnic groups in the unified country. Thus, a shared value system was established among the various ethnic groups, both Chinese and barbarians. A new interpretation about the “great unification” concept was established through theoretical reconstruction and institutional practice. The innovative breakthrough of the “great unification” concept in theory and practice was achieved.

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