On confucianism reflected in the description of clothing in the Analects of Confucius

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the clothing codes described in the Analects of Confucius, and explores the reasons for the rules setting up, including the rules of color, the design, the pattern, and even the material of the clothes whose distinct features reflect the ceremony and etiquette of the time in the classic, which are in correspondence with the requirements of Confucianism, especially for stressing the social rights, obligations and codes of conduct to everyone in the society.

Keywords: clothing, confucianism, the analects of confucius

I. Introduction

Analects of Confucius is a rich text that includes the fundamental philosophical and social ideas of Confucianism. Most studies on this classic focus on its ideas on education thought, political ideas and moral ethics, few has paid attention to its comments on clothing, how it is related to the society at the time, as well as the relationship between human and nature. This paper examines the clothing and its color, design, pattern, style and fabric to discuss how these features reflect the etiquette of his time, and how it was part of the social stratification, social obligation, and codes of conducts. The paper argues that these clothing codes and styles should be seen as part of Confucian thinking.

II. Analects of Confucius and Clothing

In addition to being a philosophical text, Analects of Confucius also stipulates a series of codes of conduct for the people to follow in their daily life; these codes are consistent with Confucius’ social ideas and moral ethics. The codes make sure the people could live harmoniously together and stay in their social positions, and that the ruler would rule benevolently. The codes of clothing, part of general codes of conduct, focus more on maintaining the hierarchical aspect of society and individual behaviors.

Influence over the clothing rules for the traditional Chinese society, lay the principles, stipulated the codes used by the later dynasties. Among the first books that connected the clothing with the society, Analects of Confucius indicated that clothing in China did not only evolve over time; it also transformed dramatically with Dynastic changes or the Imperial decree of a new ruler. For thousands of years, generations of clothes
designers have devoted themselves to building different system of clothing indicating people's social rank and position more distinguishable, especially between the people in different social class through the pattern, color, material and style of their dress. For example, among the upper dominating class in ancient feudal society, only to the Emperor's robe was assigned the yellow color and the dragon emblem which served as an exclusive affirmation of their power, to the others, it was forbidden.

Based on the core spirit of Analects of Confucius, the clothing plays an important role in building up the harmonious society at that time. First, ceremony and etiquette concerning clothing may keep the whole society in perfect order, thus achieving stability and harmony, through requiring every one to act up according to their social role, duty and the social norm. Different social classes should be dressed in different ways in terms of color, material, style, pattern, ornament, so on and so forth. Second, ceremony direct social norm of people, which means the dressing must be conformed to the requirements of etiquette under different situations, the proper costume at the proper time could transform and define a monarch's reputation well. And third, clothing functions as etiquette in social situations, helping people to deal with each other and cooperate well with each other.

III. Confucianism Reflected in the Description of Clothing in James Legge's Version of Analects of Confucius

This paper studies how clothing reflects Confucius's idea of hierarchical thinking of the society, his idealism of social harmony, the harmony between human and natural worlds via examining and analyzing specific examples from Analects of Confucius translated by James Legge.

1. Color scheme in clothing

Colors are important to traditional Chinese philosophical thinking. According to those who believe in the Chinese Taoist philosophy of "Wu Xing", "blue, red, yellow, white and black" are associated with the primary substances of "wood, fire, earth, metal and water" of which the entire universe consist. In ancient China, Confucius advocated the regulations of color in clothing, exemplified as the followings authentic and academic version chosen from James Legge (1815-1897), who was regarded as a noted Scottish sinologist. During his tenure as holder of the Chair of Chinese language and Literature at Oxford University, he devoted some 20 years to the translation of the Chinese classics, making contributions to the dissemination of Chinese ideas and culture to the rest of the world (Kong Xianglin, 2006: 324). The key colors in traditional Chinese thinking; their significance: the harmony between the nature and human worlds; human world as extension of the natural world.

Let us examine the specific 15 examples of color from James Legge's version of The Analects of Confucius:

Example 1: “The superior man did not use a deep purple, or a puce color, in the ornaments of his dress. Even in his undress, he did not wear anything of a red or reddish color.” (James Legge: 131-132)

After entering the slavery and the feudal society, colors of clothing not only served for practical purpose, but possessed aesthetic function of attracting others’ attention. Colors also helped distinguish social class between the noble and the lower rank. And as a symbol of the class, dark red, yellow, green, black and white were seen as the noble colors, and for the mainstream colors, between the green and white, the dark and red, between the purple and smoke color, and yellow and black color, all these intermediate colors were considered as the low-rank colors. According to the custom of the Western Zhou dynasty, the bright red and bright purple was very noble colors for noble use. In Confucius' opinion, the collar or decoration of gentlemen’s clothes should not be in