



## The Rise and Fall of Confucian Ideology in Eastern Han Dynasty: From the Perspective of Interaction Between the Scholars and the Regime

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### Abstract

The rise and fall of Confucian ideology in Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD - 220 AD) are an important research subject in the research of Confucian history of the Han Dynasty. From the perspective of the interaction between Confucianism and the regime, studying the rise and fall of the Confucian ideology is to take the ideology of Confucianism as a social structural factor. The mutual adjustment relation between the Confucian ideology and the realistic politics can be showed from the mutual adjustment between the scholars and the regime. The study of the interaction between the scholars and the regime is mainly conducted in two dimensions, which are the objective change of Confucian scholars' political situations and the subjective change of Confucian scholars' self-evaluation standards.

**Key words:** Confucianism; Ideology; Scholars

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### INTRODUCTION

After the Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC - 24 AD) "rejecting the other schools of thoughts and only respecting Confucianism", Confucianism had completed the change from an ancient philosophy to the regime's ideology. However, Confucianism became an

ideology that did not simply mean that Confucianism was for the official use of the regime. In our understanding, Confucianism as the ideology or Confucian politics meant Confucianism got the recognition and support of the authority so Confucianism became a structural factor or a spiritual power to legally participate in the construction of the social realistic circumstance and the social political system. The so-called the structural factor is that Confucianism as a ideological system, which had ideological functions, formed interactive relations through a mutual coordination among Confucianism and other subsystems or functional areas of the whole social system, such as politics, economy, etc. so they effectively developed respective functions. If the Confucianism was the ideological system, namely the social structural factor in Han Dynasty, whether or not functions of the Confucian ideology were effectively played that was related to the stability of the whole social system, and also determined the fate of Confucianism as the imperial ideology. Whether or not the functions were effectively played that was not only an issue related to the Confucian system itself, but also was an issue related to the mutual coordination between the Confucian ideology and other realistic political subsystems. From the perspective of the interaction, the functions were effectively played that meant Confucianism could give active, positive responses to realistic political issues. It included two aspects: first, Confucianism could give the support to the political reality, namely Confucianism could provide a legal basis for the regime's existence; second, Confucianism could improve the political reality, namely Confucianism could give critical reflection to the political behavior according to its moral ideals. It always was an important issue in Confucianism that there was a contradiction between its moral ideals and the political reality. The contradiction determined that the Confucianism always existed in the space formed by tensile force of the moral ideals and the political reality. When the tensile force was controlled in a

reasonable range, it indicated that the interactive relation between the Confucianism and the realistic politics was proper and effective. When the tension intensified or caused conflict, the relation of mutual adjustment between the Confucianism and the realistic politics should have some obvious problems. If the problems continued and there were no good solutions, the interactive relation of the Confucianism and the realistic politics would be in an emergency situation or even rupture, so the functions of Confucian ideology were not normally played, and the fall of the Confucianism as an ideological system was inevitable.

In Western Han Dynasty and Eastern Han Dynasty, the relations of Confucianism and the realistic politics were gradually developing, from the alienation to the interactive integration, and then to the tension in the interactive relation. This process was a process of ups and downs of political fate of Confucian moral successors—Confucian scholars. So Confucianism and the realistic politics had different attitudes towards each other in the different historical periods, specifically there were different relationships of Confucian scholars and the political power of the different historical periods. Therefore, this paper studies the relations of mutual adjustment between Confucianism and the realistic politics that should first explore the relationships between the scholars and the regime from the perspective of the mutual adjustment. The interactive relationships between the regime and the scholars had multiple dimensions, for example, whether the scholars participating in the regime could get support, whether the regime could effectively respond to political demands of the scholars, whether the scholars had a space to carry out their moral ideals in the political, realistic and legal range, and whether the political power could get the moral recognition and evaluation of the Confucian scholars. These problems could be reduced to some simpler problems: how the Confucian scholars as Confucian moral keepers interconnected with the realistic political situations, how the Confucian scholars changed self identification and self-evaluation standards, and so on.

## 1. THE POLITICAL SITUATIONS OF THE CONFUCIAN SCHOLARS HAD CHANGED

In Han Dynasty, after the Emperor Wu of Western Han Dynasty “rejecting the other schools of thoughts and only respecting Confucianism”, Confucianism gradually developed to become an ideology in more than a hundred years. The Confucian doctrines had become the important cultural background and ideological resources that a political reconstruction had to face when the Emperor Guangwu of Eastern Han reconstructed the Han Dynasty. The Emperor Guangwu, whose name was Liu Xiu, was a student in the Imperial College. As the student, he studied

Confucianism so the Confucian scholars publicly praised him. He rebuilt the Imperial College and made efforts to recover Confucian education. In the beginning of Eastern Han Dynasty, his actions had captured the hearts and minds of the Confucian scholars. Later, the Emperor Ming practiced ancient rites and the scholars praised his ruling period as “golden time”; the Emperor Zhang encouraged the development of Confucianism and actively responded to the request of scholars for officially discussing Confucian doctrines (so the Bai Hu Guan meeting was held). The Emperor Zhang had close contact with scholars and diviners. It can be said that the regime had effectively supported scholars to participate in political affairs and actively responded to political requests of scholars in the early Eastern Han Dynasty. So the foundation and political behavior of the regime got universal recognition and praise of the intelligentsia. From these aspects, it can be seen that there were better interactive relationships between the scholars and the regime in the early Eastern Han Dynasty.

However, this kind of better situation obviously changed in the middle of Eastern Han Dynasty. In the Han Dynasty, including Western Han Dynasty and Eastern Han Dynasty, the selecting officer system basically was an evaluation system. We can get a glimpse of the general appearance of the interaction between the scholars and the regime from the evaluation system in Eastern Han Dynasty. The first half period of Eastern Han Dynasty was the periods of the Emperor Guangwu, Ming, Zhang and He ruling period. In the period, the evaluation system had a relatively stable development. The evaluation system basically was a continuation of the selecting pattern laid by the Emperor Wu of Western Han dynasty. However, the Emperor Guangwu changed a rule and requested some high rank officials to recommend some people for official positions every year. The Emperor He required that the number of selected officials was in proportion to the population of the local government’s ruling. These measures were a sign of further improving the evaluation system in the early Eastern Han Dynasty. However, after the Emperor He, the evaluation system had a lot of corruption in the periods of the Emperor Shang, An, Shun, Huan and Ling ruling and a large number of eunuchs and imperial relatives were promoted to officials through the evaluation system instead of scholars. The regimes also encouraged people to give money for getting official positions to solve the regimes’ financial problems. Such officials often abused the power. In my opinion, the problems of the evaluation system came from eunuchs’ and imperial relatives’ interference to politics in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. It started in the Emperor a ruling. However, it was not just an issue, in which, an emperor was deceived by base people. The issue was that eunuchs and imperial relatives gradually replaced scholars to get the scholars’ political rights and political status. When scholars studied hard or strived for virtue, eunuchs and

imperial relatives got a special kindness of the ruler and resisted the scholars to enter the regime. So the political fairness, ideals and morals, which were political and moral connotation carefully built up by the mutual adjustment of scholars and the regime before, were on the verge of disintegration.

In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, not only scholars had more difficulties to get official positions through the evaluation system, but also those high-ranking scholar officials were also increasingly unable to display political behavior to achieve Confucian moral ideals in the political circumstance of the Emperor An ruling and later. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, when high-ranking scholar officials gave an emperor advice, they often did not get the monarch's positive responses, and the treacherous eunuchs and imperial relatives could lodge a false accusation against a high-ranking scholar official at any time. A high-ranking scholar official could be killed by a false accusation. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the political situation of scholars had a turning point in the period of the Emperor by aruling, and a remarkable event was that the chief adviser Yang Zhen was dismissed by the emperor. Finally, Yang Zhen drank poison wine to death because of the dismissal caused by eunuchs' calumny. This tragic ending let countless literati distraughtly deplore. It symbolized that there were growing differences between the regime of the Eastern Han Dynasty and Confucian scholars.

In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, The regime was indifferent and even rude in responding to the demand of Confucian scholars for participating in politics. The literati had a smaller space to practice their morals. They were unable to display Confucian ideals in the political reality. They had a basic communication with the regime before, and it was to give expostulations to the regime. However, it could lead to get punished or death penalty in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. We know that functions of Confucian ideology played a big role in the reflection and defense to the regime. However, only if the political power and Confucian moral discourse could mutually adjust to form a fusion of the politics and the morals, people would recognize the political legitimacy and authority, the Confucian consciousness would be flourishing, and the power of the political system and the Confucian ideology would together form an integration of all forces of the autocratic empire to maintain the unified administration for a long time. However, in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the successors and practitioner of Confucian moral ideals -- the Confucian scholars' political situations had changed. It indicated that Confucianism as the ideology was first trampled by the autocratic power. Some problems, such as good people could not be promoted because of the failure of the evaluation system, eunuchs and imperial relatives got power to have no promotion for scholars and even cause some scholars' suicide for morals, were sufficient to show that the positive interactive relationship

between the scholars and the regime was disintegrating. So the Confucian ideology, which sustained a unified Han Dynasty, also tended to decline.

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## 2. THE SCHOLAR SELF-EVALUATION STANDARDS CHANGED

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The above analysis of the political situations in the late Eastern Han Dynasty is objectively analyzing relationship changes of the scholars and the power. The Confucian ideology used to be an ideological system so we should not only focus on the macro political external, but also analyze inner thoughts of the Confucian scholars who were the main body of the Confucian ideology. Throughout the Eastern Han Dynasty, the spiritual world of Confucian thinkers had a major change, which was the change of self-evaluation standards. It happened after the early Eastern Han Dynasty. In the Early Eastern Han Dynasty, the mainstream scholars and gentlemen all willingly accepted the Han regime ruling and praised the regime. It had a direct impact on the scholars' judgment on their self value. In the period of the Emperor Guangwu ruling, Huan Tan was a knowledgeable and intelligent person and studied the "Five Classics". In his book *New Discussions*, he made standards to identify the quality and levels of scholars:

Virtuous and intelligent people have five levels: Virtuous and intelligent people of a town will conduct themselves with prudence in home and be nice to friends; Virtuous and intelligent people of a county will struggle to be successful and know some methods and knowledge; Virtuous and intelligent people of a province will faithfully do things, be honest, upright, fair and can manage people and understand orders; Virtuous and intelligent people, who assist high rank officials, know the classics, have good reputation, are kind, insist on the principles and can manage people; Virtuous and intelligent people of a nation will have high unsurpassed talents and bold visions, are different from regular people, and can achieve great successes.<sup>1</sup>

Huan Tan' discussions of scholars' characters gave standards for evaluating scholars. In the early Eastern Han Dynasty, these scholars' characters were political standards to evaluate the value of scholars. This shows that the official recognition and evaluation system for scholars were recognized by the scholars and literati. The scholar self evaluation had to be based on their ability to participate in political activities and obtain appropriate administrative positions. If a scholar had knowledge and talents but could not make progress in his official career, other people would doubt his ability. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, scholars who could not get appropriate official positions would often write articles to express their depression or justification.

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<sup>1</sup> *New Discussions: Seeking Aid.*

Confucian scholars widely accepted the standard of “A scholar should get respect from his official career” in the early Eastern Han Dynasty. It shows that the scholars recognized and liked the regime. However, the scholar evaluation criteria was quietly changing in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, and the important reason for the change was that good scholars were getting less appropriate positions because of the political darkness. The “official standard” of assessing the value of scholars, namely good scholars should have outstanding careers had to quit the stage of history. In Wang Fu’s book *Qian Fu Lun*, he paid attention to virtuous victims and intelligent people who lived in lower positions. He thought that evaluating a scholar’s characters of his official rank had lost the authenticity:

The so-called sages or gentlemen do not have to be rich and honorable. Sages or gentlemen had better to be rich and honorable, however, being rich and honorable are not the marks of sages or gentlemen. The so-called base people do not have to suffer from hunger, poverty and shame, which they may easily get but it can not prove anything.<sup>2</sup>

In the political reality, the official evaluation system for evaluating scholars’ characters and value had been shaken increasingly because a high rank official might not be an honest gentleman and a low rank official could have talents. In fact, scholars gradually less cared about official titles because a scholar’s character evaluation system was gradually formed after the middle of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and it was independent of the official evaluation system. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, appraising scholars’ characters became a specialized knowledge, which was started by Guo Tai. However, after the middle of the Eastern Han Dynasty, appraising scholars’ characters already was a kind of fashion. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the scholar’s character evaluation system clearly showed a departure from the official system. Xu Ruzi, Shen Tupan and other people were famous hermits but they had prominent status in the scholars’ opinions. In the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, seclusion was a fashion. It was a change in the scholar self-evaluation standards. When becoming a official and making progress were no longer a Confucian scholar’s way to realize the self value and even further away from the regime could maintain an independent spirit and innocent personality, the scholars might not want to follow and guard the regime.

In Eastern Han Dynasty, the transformation of the Confucian scholar self-evaluation standards was not simply an issue of the scholar self evaluation and identification, and it also was a subjective dimension of the change of interactive relationship between the scholars and the regime. For the manifestation of good scholar characters and value, the scholars were gradually from close to the regime too far away. The scholar self-

evaluation standards were first to follow the official evaluation system, and then to become the independent scholar character evaluation system. It was an important manifestation of the tension in the relationships of the scholars and the power.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Qin and Han dynasties brought a big change to China. The unified political and cultural system of the autocratic empire was formed in this period. Since the Han Dynasty’s “rejecting the other schools of thoughts and only respecting Confucianism”, Confucian values and principles began to define and shape the Han Dynasty’s unique political style. The ideology of Confucianism had become the core issue of Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. The academic circle already has a better study on Confucianism rising to the imperial ideology in the Western Han Dynasty; however, the decline of the Confucian ideology in the Eastern Han Dynasty has not been researched systematically. This paper’s arguments are based on taking the Confucian ideology as a social structural factor of the Han Dynasty to study the rise and fall of Confucian ideology from the perspective of interaction of Confucianism and the realistic politics. This paper also has a unique angle, which is to study the interaction of Confucianism and the realistic politics from the interactive relationships between the Confucian scholars and the regime of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

For studying the decline of a good interactive relationship between scholars and the regime of the Eastern Han Dynasty, this paper conducts the analysis of two dimensions, which are the objective change of Confucian scholars’ political situations, and the subjective change of Confucian scholar self-evaluation standards. Objectively speaking, scholars had more smooth ways to become officials and scholars who had knowledge or management ability had more chances to work with the regime in the early Eastern Han Dynasty. The regime could be actively and effectively respond to scholars’ advice of regulating political behavior of the regime at the time. However, the better political situation had changed in the mid Eastern Han Dynasty. In the selecting official systems, the evaluation system as a main system of selecting officers had many problems. The political rights and political status of the scholars were occupied by the forces of eunuchs and some imperial relatives. It was common that good scholars could not become high rank officials and the emperors refused some advice of scholars or killed scholars because of their advice. The base and ties of mutual adjustment of the scholars and the political power had been destructive. In the scholars’ minds, they believed “Show up in a good political system and hide when the political situation is bad”, which was a Confucian tradition. When scholars recognized the

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<sup>2</sup> *Qian Fu Lun-On Honor*

regime, they would like to become officials of the regime, and vice versa. In the early Eastern Han Dynasty, scholar self-evaluation standards were based on their appropriate administrative ranks. However, in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, scholar self-evaluation standards were gradually separated from the official evaluation system and there were independent scholar self-evaluation standards for scholars' value, which even became a unique cultural phenomenon, namely "Intelligent people should hide". It shows that the scholars' recognition of the regime was changing. When the basis and link of mutual adjustment between scholars and the regime could not be guaranteed and the moral force represented by scholars became a centrifugal force for the regime of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the justification and reflection functions of Confucianism ideology would not be effectively played, then from the rise to fall of the Confucian ideology in the Eastern Han Dynasty was inevitable.

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