The Three Worlds of Welfare Philosophy: The Hong Kong Experience

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Introduction

The development of social policy in Hong Kong has been shaped by three ideologies of social welfare, including the intellectual heritage of Chinese Confucianism, the Liberalism upheld by Hong Kong government (especially the British Colonial Government), and the Collectivism advocated by some non-governmental organizations.

Chinese Philanthropy

In Chinese history, activities of private philanthropy were usually launched when government aid was inadequate, and were largely dependent on the organizers for financial resources (Meng & Wang, 1986). It is noteworthy that the philanthropists of traditional China rarely appeared on the scene as social reformers. At the ideational level, they did not advocate that people had the right to obtain assistance from the government when they were in need; and they did not, or dared not, challenge the emperor's arbitrariness in his benevolent acts. At the organizational level, apart from those based on kinship, religion, and trade, there were no community-wide philanthropic organizations existing as intermediate groups in traditional China. Rather, they usually operated on a localized, *ad hoc* basis, in spite of the fact that there was consistently a gap left by the negligent government and inadequate family systems (Liu, 1978; Leung, 1992). One explanation for this phenomenon, which may be too focused on "dark side" of Confucian culture, is that

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it was an inevitable outcome of the emphasis of Confucianism on self-reliance and self-cultivation.

Confucius was a proponent of radical immanence, a notion not prominent in the Western philosophical tradition which considers that man's physical universe is not separate from the plane of spiritual experience and of the "supreme being" (Hall & Ames, 1987). For Confucius, the immanent and the transcendental worlds are not distinct or mutually independent. He sees human beings as "ethical agents," inter-connected and able to communicate with Heaven (*T'ien*). The Decree of Heaven (*T'ien-ming*), however, is not always explicit but is manifested through the individual's moral praxis (Mou, 1984). Therefore, the major goal that a human being should aspire to is to seek moral perfection in ethical deeds through self-cultivation. This is not just a way of coming to know Heaven's will, but also a means of salvation in the Chinese sense. However, this supreme moral position of self-reliance and self-cultivation has the effect of defining "individual problems" as purely personal problems that should preferably not be resolved in the "public" sphere. As a result, positive freedom and social equality were conspicuously neglected in China (Jones, 1990:36). In addition, because of the belief that society is a natural development of one's self and one's family ("familization"), harmony and tolerance were highly treasured (Yu, 1984). Any action which could lead to confrontation in society or discontinuity of traditions was indefensible. This idea, coupled with the principle that personal obligation takes precedence over individual rights (Chow, 1987; de Bary, 1983), devalued any argument that was in favor of *social* welfare, which would involve wealth redistribution and conflicts of different interest groups in society. In consequence, Confucian ideas promoted a kind of welfare which was only concentrated in the family system (Lin, 1994). This was in sharp contrast to the Christian ideas that promoted a kind of altruism that extended far beyond one's family members. As defined in Christian writings, it is "more blessed to give than to receive". Moreover, one should "love for one's neighbour", where neighbours are not only the people one knows, but also to the strangers who are in need of help (Chow, 1987).

However, it is possible that Neo-Confucianism coupled with Buddhism came to fill the intellectual void that was left by traditional Confucianism. Partly owing to the influence of these two philosophical traditions, various systems of public and private welfare for "citizens" and "strangers" evolved from the basis of a predominantly familial society (Scogin, 1978). Despite this, however, unlike the social democratic ideas that dominated the Western political scene at the turn of the twentieth century, Neo-Confucianism did not address the issues of government responsibility and people's rights, and the "welfare" that was promoted still aimed at fixing the defects of society on a charitable basis and at the individual level. People have few expectations of state intervention and a redistributive *social* policy, let alone a welfare state, is unlikely to grow from these intellectual resources. This is different from the contemporary Western ideas of social welfare that have been emphasizing on the principles of equality, social rights, citizenship, and the moral obligation of the government to help individual citizen to attain self-fulfillment.

The above-mentioned hypothesis that the Confucian ethics has had important influence on the Chinese culture of social welfare still needs close scrutiny. More empirical studies on the attitudes of social welfare of Chinese in different places are also needed, so that this hypothesis can be substantiated. On the other hand, some scholars have observed that people in East Asia tend to assume that a government should only play a minor role in the provision of welfare (e.g. Jones, 1993; Leung & Nann, 1995). They also do not cherish an institutional-redistributive model of social welfare, but prefer a particular type of welfare system which is characterized by "conservative corporatism without [Western-style] worker participation; subsidiarity without the Church; solidarity without equality; laissez-faire without libertarianism" (Jones, 1993: 214). Such a cultural context, together with the commanding influence in the public sphere that political leaders in East Asia possessed, meant that the ruling elites were the envy of their Western counterparts. It is because they have less pressure from their electorates to increase the expenses in social welfare, and hold to the principles of low taxation and low expenditure. The development of social welfare in Hong Kong may give support to this thesis. For instance, it has often been remarked that the people of Hong Kong are characterized by a lack of confidence in

government interventions and seldom seek to have their needs satisfied in the public or political arena. Rather, their needs are met by family groups and they have the normative and behavioral tendency to place their familial interests above the interests of society – "utilitarianistic familism," as one sociologist puts it (Lau, 1982).

Hong Kong Government

The British Colonial Government and the Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government have both adopted liberalist principles of "minimum government" and sought to offer a safety net for those unable to provide for themselves. Adopting some elements of Confucianism, the SAR Government's basic philosophy of social policy, as the Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa puts it, is one that is "complementary to the laissez-faire economic policy" and built on "the belief that self-motivation is the basis for both individual and societal progress." The government's primary task "is to create the conditions necessary to foster, maintain and enhance self-motivation" (Tung, 2000: para. 50). The link between Confucianism and the government's ideas of social welfare is also illustrated by the Chief Executive's repeated appeals to the importance of traditional virtues for "a society of greater harmony" (e.g. Tung, 2000: para. 127; 1999: para.167).

In particular, social policy in Hong Kong has the following principles: (1) welfare expenditure must not interfere with economic development, growth in economy is the foundation and impetus for development in social welfare; (2) people should look to the family, the market and the voluntary agencies for their welfare needs; (3) social welfare is defined as charity and benevolence, not an indisputable right (Wilding & Mok, 1997; Chow, 1993; McLaughlin, 1993). In brief, the persistent, and most important, aim of the government's welfare system was the provision of a safety net for those unable to provide for themselves. As the last British Governor Chris Patten insisted, the Hong Kong welfare system existed merely "to protect the vulnerable and the disadvantaged members of society, the unfortunate minority, who through no fault of their own, are left behind by the growing prosperity enjoyed by the rest of Hong Kong" (1996, para. 78). Under the rule of Tung, this residual goal of social policy is more explicit and, as he states, the government "is firmly committed to providing a reliable safety net as a basic guarantee for our citizens. Through

various services, the Government allows people of different circumstances to demonstrate their potential and to strive for a better future" (e.g. Tung, 2001: para. 107).

Non-government Organizations

Hong Kong is a dynamic society that has been continuously affected by Western culture. In the development of social welfare, international welfare organizations have played a very important role. The overseas missionary bodies and charitable organizations have been the main actors of social welfare ever since Hong Kong became a British colony. Early in September 1848 the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres came to Hong Kong and ran a school which also looked after the orphans (Ticozzi, 1983:98-99). The Christian churches followed suit and set up their welfare organizations.

Before the 1970s, these voluntary organizations were mostly supported by their foreign religious organizations. In the two decades after WW II, their work concentrated predominantly at the relief of refugees. Their contribution to Hong Kong was timely when the small colony was overwhelmed with the influx of refugees escaping from the civil war in China. They focused on material aid such as distribution of food and clothing from donor churches overseas (mainly from the USA, but also from European countries, Australia and New Zealand). When the refugees' problem became less acute after 1962, their services extended to other areas. The scales of service of these agencies were massive. For instance, an estimate showed that the total recurrent expenditure of forty-three agencies was HK$ 25 million (about US$3.5 million) in 1966, when the Social Welfare Department spent only about HK$17.5 million (about US$2.2 million) that year (Lutheran World Federation, 1968:1; Hong Kong Government, 1969:304-305).

The significance of foreign welfare organizations can be further illustrated by a voluntary agency, the Lutheran World Federation.[1] It launched a sizable material

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[1] The Lutheran World Federation later joined with other Protestant organizations to form the Hong Kong Christian Service (HKCS) in 1967. The HKCS has been playing an important role in social

aids programme for the poor and, at its peak, handled about one million pounds of food and clothing per year. Their extensive services included: day-nursery, health services, self-help and rehabilitation programmes for the handicapped, family social services, Swedish sponsorship (financial assistance to primary schooling) and post-secondary student aid programme, vocational training, TB. rehabilitation, etc.. Throughout the mid-sixties, the average number of people helped per month by the Federation maintained at about 40,000, and once amounted to over 54,000 in the fourth quarter of 1969. In 1966, the total number of snacks served to children was more than 4.3 million (Lutheran World Federation, 1966, 1968, 1969).

The Federation's views towards social problems in Hong Kong are also worth mentioning. Christianity was the main theme of their services which was stated in their charter: "[The goal is] to meet, in Christian love and compassion, human need as it may develop in the world" (Lutheran World Federation, 1969:back cover). In face of the wide-spread poverty problem, the Federation once remarked, "In Hong Kong we have been booming trade and booming inhumanity" (Lutheran World Federation, 1969:1). Their Director added that, "Poverty in Hong Kong is not inevitable but intolerable. Considering the financial resources of this community, poverty is also inexcusable, and, as we have seen in 1966 and 1967, dangerous" (Stumpf & Nielsen, 1970). The Federation's view on social reform was pioneering at that time. They contended that, at a deeper level, human problems had "a close relation to the prevailing moral principles of our community and to its concept of what constitutes social justice." If the social problems were to be genuinely eliminated, the community and the government would also have to change, with integrated social planning and action which looked beneath the surface and dug into the roots. When talking about the rising crime rate of the colony, the Federation asserted that, people would be saved only when they are considered in the light of "the conditions and processes which are shaping them.... our target when talking about prevention should not be the

service since then.

criminal act per se, or the individual person who commits it, but rather the framework inside which the criminal career is initiated, then nurtured, and finally confirmed" (Lutheran World Federation, 1972:1). In brief, not only have these foreign voluntary organizations contributed to the development of innovative ideas and social services in Hong Kong, but also, some of their leaders have been active participants in the discourse of social welfare philosophy (Lam & Chow, 1998). Along with certain expatriate scholars and social workers who had been educated abroad, they acted as a major vehicle for transferring the Western welfarist ideology into Hong Kong, characterized by a mixture of Fabianism and egalitarianism (Lam, 1997).

Although not all of them corresponded with the Hong Kong Government's policies in social welfare, the voluntary welfare organizations were later chosen by the Government as its "partner" in developing social welfare. Since the mid-1970s, they have been playing an important role in social welfare and have employed about two-third of social workers in Hong Kong. Most of these "foreign welfare organizations" were gradually indigenized in terms of their finance and personnel. Their incomes are now predominantly (over 80%) from the public and their staff are locally recruited. On the other hand, however, their activities are largely influenced, if not directed, by governmental policies. The development of welfare organizations has been concomitant with their reliance on the Government. For this reason, Nelson Chow (1986) opined that they are in reality "camouflaged quasi-government agencies". It is becoming doubtful how much the voluntary organizations can now contribute to the innovation of ideas and services of social welfare in Hong Kong, provided that they are relying heavily on the Government in resources.

There are also some traditional indigenous organizations in Hong Kong which provide assistance to members (on the basis of same surname or native places, or in the form of clansmen associations and locality associations) who are in need (Chow, 1986), or run welfare activities for the whole community, for instance, the Tung Wah Hospital Group (Sinn, 1989). When the structure of the family based society was

severely affected by wars and migrations during the 1940s in China, the void was partly filled by the services of these indigenous organizations.

The Kaifong (literally means "neighbours" in Chinese) associations were one major type of indigenous organizations which had played an important role in the social welfare field after the war. With the assistance of the Government, by the end of 1951, eighteen Kaifong Welfare Associations were established with a total membership that amounted to 105,395. This number represented roughly one adult in every fifteen belonged to one of these associations. Apart from representing to the Government on some urban problems, they also contributed to the development of local welfare measures in urban district by establishing free schools and free clinics, providing children's playgrounds and other recreational facilities for young people (Wong, 1972). There were also other indigenous organizations which have been running various social services in Hong Kong since the last century, particularly the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and the Po Leung Kuk. The two organizations[2] have further expanded their services in education, social services and hospitals after the mid-sixties.[3]

In spite of their long history and rich experiences, however, the significance of these indigenous welfare organizations in modern social welfare of Hong Kong were often underrated when compared with foreign welfare organizations. A historian even criticized them about their contribution, "The committeemen of the Po Leung Kuk were not in advance of their time; they were mostly well-meaning conservative and

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[2] The Tung Wah Group of Hospitals was founded in 1870 and the Po Leung Kuk was founded in 1876. See Sinn (1989) for the history of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and Lethbridge (1978:71-103) for that of the Po Leung Kuk.

[3] The Tung Wah Group is running 5 hospitals, 51 schools, 103 social services centres (elderly, youth, rehabilitation, and etc.) in 2002, and its annual expenditure amounted to about US$590 million in 2001 (Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, 2002). The Po Leung Kuk is conducting 170 welfare institutions, including orphanages, schools, rehabilitation centres, elderly services, and other services. Its annual expenditure was about US$200 million in 2001 (Po Leung Kuk, 2002). Like other voluntary welfare organizations in Hong Kong, they now rely heavily on the government's subsidies.

traditional Chinese, concerned to do good, to exercise benevolence, but not to subvert the established order of things. They were not reformers in the western sense, not intellectual busybodies probing into the cesspools of society, nor humanitarians emotionally involved in the removal of social injustices. The society they controlled was a traditional, charitable association" (Lethbridge, 1978:96).

A study has also suggested that these philanthropic groups are influenced by Confucian ethics and emphasize the importance of helping recipients to become self-reliant rather than focusing on social reform (Lam & Chow, 1998). If judged by the standards of Western welfarism, they may be regarded as unprogressive and remedial. Yet, their ideas are in tune with traditional Chinese thought and the ethos of Hong Kong people. How should these social and cultural contexts, which are radically different from those in the West, be taken into account when we discuss the issue of social welfare philosophy?

Whose Welfare?

Social welfare is a modernization project of the "West" and entails a particular prescription of a good society, both in terms of morality (e.g. social rights) and in terms of human relationships (e.g. equality). Its "Western" origins have raised doubts over whether it is meaningful for different cultures. The question becomes more complicated if we take into account the fact that "social welfare" has developed in disparate patterns throughout the world. It is logically possible for two societies to differ in terms of the most fundamental concepts they employ. For instance, Tao (1991) contends that the rights-based approach and the claim of government responsibility in the West may not be suitable for Hong Kong. She concludes that there are grounds for an alternative approach to the moral justification of welfare in Hong Kong based on the concept of human virtues, and that a society's welfare policy should be evaluated in terms of the notion of benevolence rather than social justice.

However, is it true that what is right or good in one situation may be entirely the opposite in another? Or are these differences only derivative and there are some

fundamental, higher-order principles which are always valid and which are mutually intelligible for all societies? At present, more research and discussion is needed to understand the relationship between the Confucian ethics and the Chinese culture of social welfare, and to develop further the paradigm (or paradigms) of social welfare philosophy.

There are two directions for future research: one is concerned with moral doctrines (theoretical) and the other with moral opinions[4] (empirical).

At the level of moral doctrines, we need to examine the philosophical and cultural theories of Confucianism and Western philosophers in the area of social welfare, so that the questions may be better clarified and understood. For instance, we can examine and compare the ideas of Neo-Confucian thinkers (e.g. Mou Tsung-san) and Western philosophers (e.g. John Rawls and Richard Titmuss) that are related to social welfare (such as those dealing with justice, equality, liberty, social rights, and citizenship).

At the empirical level, since there are different "morally active practitioners" in the development of disparate patterns of social welfare, the challenge of social welfare philosophy is about whether different actors' interpretations of social welfare can be incorporated into this discipline of practical social ethics. Hence, we should study different types of welfare culture (as manifested in the people's ethos, the voluntary associations' welfarisms, and the government's social policy) and their implications for social welfare in Hong Kong. In more concrete terms, we can study how the welfare practitioners of international organizations redefined their roles and functions in order to accommodate the culture of Hong Kong. They can be compared with the roles and functions of their mother agency counterparts (e.g. the Methodists in the US). How Hong Kong indigenous welfare organizations have adjusted their welfare values in the past few decades can also be studied. Furthermore, we can also study the SAR Government's philosophy of social welfare and compare it with the culture of Hong Kong people manifested in opinion surveys.

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[4] The division of moral doctrines and moral opinions for analysis is adopted from Hare (1991).

The research with the above directions can also contribute to the theory building in the area of social policy. For the results can provide insight into the influence of Confucian ethics on the development of social welfare in East Asia, enriching our understanding of an alternative vision of modernity.

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