The Public Sphere in China

Beginnings of a Confucian Public Sphere

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§1 Introduction

In his 1993 article *The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture,* Frederic Wakeman writes:

> For Habermas, as for Marx, the emergence of civil society and its attendant public sphere was inextricably connected to the emergence of the bourgeoisie. That linkage alone fixes both ideal types in a particular historical setting; and if we allow ourselves to be hobbled by teleology, then neither concept is going to fit the Chinese case very well. But as terms of social practice, which can be gingerly universalized, civil society and public sphere may afford a better understanding of recent events in China (p. 112).

The 'recent events' Wakeman writes about are the 1978 Beijing Spring and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The Beijing Spring lasted until 1979 and was a brief period of political liberalization during which there was greater freedom of speech in China. This freedom was used by the people to voice strong criticisms of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a disastrous period in Chinese history during which the Communist Party claimed to remove all bourgeois elements from its ranks. The Cultural Revolution resulted in millions of deaths and completely halted economic growth. During the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, students occupied Tiananmen Square in central Beijing for one and a half month, starting April 15. They finally had enough of the corruption of the Chinese Communist Party and demanded further liberalization of the country's political structure, drawing their inspiration partly from the Beijing Spring. The students failed to have their demands met. On June 4, the protests turned deadly when the government ordered a crackdown, causing an unknown number of deaths.[1]

If Wakeman were to rewrite his article today, he would undoubtedly take a keen interest in the case of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. This city became Chinese territory only in 1997, after the so-called handover had transferred sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China. That Hong Kong enjoys a high degree of autonomy is the result of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, ratified at the United Nations in 1985, which guarantees Hong Kong's basic freedoms, including the freedom of speech, freedom of press and the right to assembly, to remain in place until 2047. When the Chinese government announced it wants to screen candidates that can run for the office of Chief Executive (the Special Administrative Region's highest political post), many people in Hong Kong felt it had gone too far. They regarded the Chinese government's decision as a means to ensure no progressive democrat could become Chief Executive. In the final quarter of 2014, students gathered in Admiralty, on Hong Kong Island, to demonstrate against the decision (Iyengar, 2014). This particular student protest did not fare well either. On September 28, the police fired tear gas into the protesting crowds to disperse them. This caused even more people to come out and support the students (Branigan & Kaiman, 2014). The resulting occupation of the area around the Central Government Complex in Admiralty, as well as Causeway Bay and Mong Kok (the city's major shopping areas and tourist spots), lasted for more than two months, after which most of the protesters stopped resisting and their camps were cleared by the police. Similar to the students of Tiananmen Square, the students of Hong Kong had none of their demands met (Phillips & Ng, 2014). At the same time, though, Hong Kong managed to show its leaders and the rest of the world that it has a vibrant public sphere that is to be reckoned with.

These two accounts, of the Tiananmen Square protests and the Umbrella Movement, lead to an interesting observation with which I wish to begin this paper: that China, a country where anything resembling a public sphere is almost non-existent, seems to harbor within its borders a city that has a public sphere so vibrant that it is likely to trigger the envy of those struggling to defend the societal value of having a strong public sphere in the West. The problem with Hong Kong's public sphere, however, is that any message it sends out falls on deaf ears. The Chinese government has chosen to ignore the entire Umbrella Movement, not even mentioning a word about it in domestic media. This silence can be explained by realizing that China is teeming with areas looking for independence (e.g. Tibet); giving in to the demands of one region may trigger cries for independence in all others. At the same time, though, the Chinese government appears interested in nourishing civil society in the mainland. More specifically, there are signs that the Chinese state wishes to develop Confucianism into a civil religion – comparable to the Christian church in the United States. Doing so, it hopes to combat the many ills plaguing its society, such as economic inequality and corruption. If this is true, then a unique opportunity presents itself to the people of Hong Kong. Rather than focus all efforts on the democratization of Hong Kong's political structure, those involved with the Umbrella Movement should concern themselves with the promotion of the idea that a strong public sphere is something to value, not only in Hong Kong, but also in mainland China. Such promotion of the public sphere would be all the more effective and consolidating if it could be voiced, not in the language of Western liberal thought, but in the language of a tradition shared by both the people of Hong Kong and mainland China: Confucianism.

I have three aims in this paper: 1) to argue that in the case of the Umbrella Movement, we are dealing with an instance of a public sphere; 2) to demonstrate that a Confucian public sphere is a theoretical possibility; and 3) to show that the Chinese state may in fact be inclined towards developing Confucianism into a civil religion, and therefore might nurture the kind of progressive Confucianism that is outlined in this paper in the nearby future. My use of the term 'civil religion' is similar to that of Robert Bellah in his 1967 article *Civil Religion in America*; I thus sharply distinguish between civil religion and state religion. While the latter depends on an infrastructure of state-sanctioned institutions (churches, temples, or other such places of worship), the former is carried popularly by the people without necessarily requiring any form of state support. In the case of the ideologically atheist People's Republic of China, however, official recognition of Confucianism as a civil religion would provide the eventual emergence of a Confucian public sphere with a major boost.

I begin the next section by discussing Jürgen Habermas (1929-) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), two of the public sphere's seminal thinkers, to arrive at a fourfold definition of the public sphere. In the third section, I apply this definition to the case of the Umbrella Movement. I argue that the Umbrella Movement is in fact an example of a public sphere and not merely a protest or demonstration. In the fourth section, I show that the Chinese Confucian tradition does not solely consist of autocratic thinkers. Confucianism is often thought to value central leadership and have a strong disdain for democratic processes. To challenge this perception, I show that the Neo-Confucian scholar Huang Zongxi[2] (1610-1695) formulated a Confucian political theory that values the existence of what, in terms of the fourfold definition I propose, comes close to counting as a public sphere. In the fifth section, I show why the Chinese state is interested in nurturing civil society. I argue that it is not entirely unthinkable that the Chinese government will ideologically condone a form of Confucianism close to the one Huang envisions in the near future. In the conclusion, I consider the consequences of my findings for the political and ideological gap that currently exists between mainland China and Hong Kong.

§2 Defining the public sphere: Arendt and Habermas

Before I can determine whether the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong is indeed an instance of what can be called a public sphere, or examine whether Huang conceptualizes a public sphere in different terms, I first have to define precisely what the public sphere is. I therefore begin this section by relating the thought of Arendt and Habermas and end it by providing a tentative definition of the public sphere.

In her 1958 work *The Human Condition,* Arendt defines the public sphere in terms of agonistic struggle. Her definition of the public sphere involves two important notions, namely visibility and artificiality. First, to Arendt, the public realm is a space in which people *can appear*. People are powerless as long as they are confined to the private realm, which is governed by intimate relationships. However, as soon as people go public, whatever they say and do gains a kind of reality and intensity it could not have had otherwise (Arendt, 1998, p. 50). This is illustrated by the Tiananmen Square protests. The protesters made use of the fact that many international television crews happened to be present for recording the visit of Mikhail Gorbachev. They knew that the presence of foreign television crews was their chance to *appear* (that is, to leave the private realm and enter the public realm), realizing all too well that the media can provide one with such visibility that one can no longer be ignored by those in power.

Second, the public realm is a common world that has *artificially* been created (Ibid., p. 52). It is a space where people and things are related to each other in a particular way by means of certain artificial elements. We might illustrate this using the example of a table. As something that is literally in between people, a table mediates and constructs certain relationships. Consider having a job interview. If there is no table in between you and your interviewer, you might feel a bit awkward and insecure. A table can make all the difference in that it might cause you to feel more confident and assertive. Since the public sphere is artificial, we are free to design it – but putting something as simple as a table between people will determine the way in which they subsequently deal with each other. The things we create end up shaping us. A public sphere is therefore not a natural given, but something we ourselves design, and are subsequently determined by.

Arendt takes the Greek *polis* as her normative model. She makes a case for the public sphere as a place where equals come to debate all matters, and which is permeated by a 'fiercely agonal spirit' (Ibid., p. 41). The *agora* serves as a location where citizens of the *polis* can go to become visible and let their voices be heard. Similarly to the example of the table just mentioned, the *agora* mediates and constructs certain human relationships. Its

agonal spirit, for example, can be said to be the result of everyone's fundamental equality. This means that as long as people are confined to the *agora*, they have to discursively persuade others of their views – having a higher status than someone else is no longer of any use. Since the *agora* is a place that has been construed by humans, it is governed by rules humans agreed upon. These rules are subject to change, should people want to do so. It might be said that in the *agora*, even what the public sphere itself is, is subject to debate. In Arendt we arguably have a conception of the public sphere as an *end in itself*, rather than as a means to achieve some other good.

Habermas' 1962 *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) paints a different picture of the public sphere, both in terms of its historical development and its function. According to Habermas, the public sphere arises from civil society – historically, it is the product of the bourgeoisie that had economic power but was politically marginalized. Civil society came into existence as soon as economic activity ceased to revolve only around the state as the primary consumer of commodities. From that moment on, the economy became of general interest and soon it was the public that supervised the commodity market. The emergence of the public sphere is therefore closely linked to the rise of capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries (Habermas, 1991, pp. 14-19). The bourgeois public sphere came into being when private individuals came together to form a public and in doing so wrestled control over the public sphere away from the public authorities (Ibid., p. 27). Since these private individuals did not and often could not hold political office, they were forced to discuss political matters outside of the political establishment, thus triggering the creation of a space that was in between the state and civil society. The places where these debates took place were Habermas' famous coffee houses, which were in principle open to all, regardless of rank or status. The policies of absolutist rulers who had hitherto been able to rule arbitrarily, were suddenly scrutinized by the public's use of reason. Publicity became the bourgeoisie's primary weapon. These coffee houses function as Habermas' normative model of what the public sphere should ideally be like: places where equals have informed, rational debates, without being coerced into having certain opinions. He thinks that the public sphere has, to a significant extent, disintegrated from what

it was in the 18th century, when the bourgeoisie was still personally debating matters related to the common good in the coffee houses. Much of Habermas' defense of the public sphere today rests on the idea that some potential of the bourgeois public sphere has been left unrealized.

One often-heard criticism of Habermas and one that can be extended to Arendt, is that he theorizes a normative model that does not correspond to any historical reality. His account is either too idealistic or simply historically inaccurate. For example, Tim Blanning doubts whether the public sphere was the product of an emancipating bourgeoisie to the extent Habermas would like us to believe. Even those who we would not call progressive or part of the bourgeoisie were active in this new political arena, such as the clergy and the nobility (Blanning, 2002, p. 12). However, Habermas' great feat was that he not only identified the public sphere as a realm fundamentally opposed to state power but also attempted to find the cause of the emergence and subsequent degeneration of the public sphere in the case of Western Europe. I agree with Blanning that Habermas' model might be too oppositional in nature and that the emergence of the public sphere and its subsequent transformation perhaps cannot be solely tied to the existence of an emancipating bourgeoisie. But then again, I would claim that the emergence of the public sphere is ultimately not necessarily tied to any geographical location, class of people or particular historical period at all. As I take Wakeman to put it, the idea of the public sphere, as a universal social practice, may still have relevance for China, even though its emergence there cannot be pinned down to any bourgeoisie (1993, p. 112). The public sphere may require a particular location (coffee houses, or agorae) but having a physical location is only one of a set of *formal* characteristics of the public sphere. One of my aims in this paper is to identify these formal characteristics so that I can apply them to a cultural setting widely different from that of Western Europe.

It should be clear that Arendt and Habermas do not conceive of the public sphere in similar terms. Where Arendt conceives of the public sphere in terms of freedom and contestation, Habermas' public sphere seems to come with an implicit rulebook. In the Habermasian public sphere, people are locked into having a rational discussion on the common good. In Arendt's public sphere, the agenda seems in no way set

(this would indeed violate the freedom that characterizes the public sphere) and equals discursively compete with each other for visibility. With Arendt, we can even argue that the definition of the public sphere is itself a topic hotly contested by those who are in it, meaning that there never is a final definition of the public sphere. What I want to establish in this paper, however, is not a final, but a *minimal* definition of the public sphere. I argue that the public sphere can *at least* be characterized as 1) a physical location where 2) matters of common interest can be discussed by 3) individuals that are in principle each other's equals in 4) opposition to, or a realm that is sharply distinguished from, government. Let me briefly defend this conception of the public sphere.

Concerning 1), I argue that there can be no such thing as a non-physical (i.e. digital) public sphere. Today's informational landscape is made up of a lot of different media, some of which discourage, and some of which encourage participation. To Habermas, media such as the radio and the television were at the heart of the public sphere's demise during the 20th century. To him, these media are meant to do two things: make money (news itself is an important commodity, after all), and manufacture consent. Television and the radio manipulate public opinion to such an extent that rational debate has been marginalized. Manufactured consensus by no means can replace the one reached through "[...] a time consuming process of mutual enlightenment" (Habermas, 1991, p. 195). Habermas, however, was completely unfamiliar with the internet when he wrote *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. The internet, one might say, is not merely used to manufacture consent but also to debate and challenge the *status quo*. Two arguments, drawing on Arendt, can be formulated against the idea that the internet constitutes a public sphere. First, the majority of social media seem to encourage consensus rather than contestation. For example, people on Facebook will, in 'liking' certain posts, only be confronted in their news feed with posts expressing similar opinions. The point of the public sphere, however, is to be able to engage with those who think *differently*. Second, to be able to act in the public sphere one has to first *appear* in it. But social media only feign appearance; people connect from the comfort of their homes and are therefore not exposed to the raw energy that accompanies actual meetings with people. One can here retort that the internet is a

bigger place than just Facebook; there are also online *fora* solely created for the purpose of encouraging debates between parties with opposing views. However, these *fora* face a different problem: the fact that there is a hierarchy of moderators and administrators who can ban users and remove posts. On the internet, people are never each other's equals: there are always those who own or ultimately control any given website. This conflicts with the condition that the public sphere is a place where *equals* come to discuss matters of common interest.

As for 2), the public sphere is a place where matters of common concern can be discussed, if *only* matters of private interest, rather than common interest, are discussed, then this means that some interests are excluded from the picture and that we are thus dealing with a private corporation rather than a public body. Although people can defend their own private interests in the public sphere, these interests should be open to scrutiny by others. People should realize that what they want has implications for others and what others want has implications for them. Inside the public sphere, private interests are therefore commonly discussed (both in the sense that everyone is involved and in the sense, that discussing private interests is what is done frequently and as if it were the natural thing to do).

In the case of 3), individuals in the public sphere are in principle each other's equals, if people were not each other's equals, then there would be a hierarchy in which those who happen to possess the most power are able to dictate what is right. But the public sphere is exactly that place where authority has no intrinsic value.

Finally, 4), the public sphere is a realm sharply distinguished, or opposed to, government, does not mean that the government may not facilitate the existence of a public sphere but does imply that its interests should not spill over to dictate that sphere. As such, the public sphere functions as a check-and-balance of state power and holds those in power accountable for their actions. Without a public sphere, governments can impose on their citizens any law they deem fit. It is for this reason that a well-functioning public sphere is such an important part of liberal democracy.

§3 The public sphere and the Umbrella Revolution

Now that I have established what the public sphere is, it is time to scrutinize the case of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement. While we are seemingly dealing here with nothing more than a demonstration that got out of hand, I argue in this section that the Umbrella Movement resulted in in a culture of debate similar to the one found in Habermas' coffee houses or Arendt's *agorae*. Let me begin by briefly clarifying what is at stake in Hong Kong and why the city is in such a unique position, before applying Habermas' and Arendt's analyses and finally the fourfold definition to the Umbrella Movement.

According to Wakeman, Western social scientists attributed the failure of the Tiananmen Square protesters to wrestle political power out of the hands of the dictatorial regime to the absence of civil society in China. That is, in the China of the late eighties of the twentieth century, there were no 'dissident intellectual circles, no Catholic church, no autonomous labor unions, no democratic parties' (Wakeman, 1993, p. 109). The reason Wakeman does not mention Hong Kong in his 1993 article explicitly is likely because back then, Hong Kong was still British territory. At first glance, Hong Kong qualifies as a city where civil society is particularly strong. The Catholic Church is quite prominent in Hong Kong; it does have labor unions and democratic parties; and it is notorious in China (to the dismay of the ruling Communist Party) for having many dissident circles – all of which are perhaps mainly relics of the city's past as a British Crown colony. Progressive movements are additionally fueled by the fact that Hong Kong is the only place in China where the existence of subversive organizations is tolerated. Not only is the infrastructure for having a healthy public sphere firmly in place constitutionally (at least for now), there is also ample reason to make use of it, for the simple reason that its very existence is continually put under pressure by the Chinese state.[3]

In reaction to the 2014 protests, Leung Chun-ying, Hong Kong's current Chief Executive, said the following in his 2015 Chinese New Year's (the year of the sheep) address: 'last year was no easy ride for Hong Kong. Our society was rife with differences and conflicts. In the coming year, I hope that all people in Hong Kong will take inspiration from the sheep's character and pull together in an accommodating manner to work for

Hong Kong's future' (Phillips, 2015). That the people of Hong Kong were not in the least planning to be like sheep had been demonstrated during the protests just months before. These, however, were not ordinary demonstrations. Especially once it became known to those involved that the initial protest was going to turn into an occupation movement that could last for months, the Admiralty site encampment was swiftly reorganized to allow the students to be at the site all the time. Places for the students to study were set up and a certain number of people were present all the time to prevent the police from suddenly clearing the site. A culture of debate on where to take the movement kept people engaged and hopeful for change. Social media were used to spread the latest news and to summon more people to the site whenever things got tense with the police. For a while, the protest site had the same function as a Habermasian coffee house, in that it facilitated the possibility for everyone to have a place to go to in order to engage in rational debate – a place that was not under direct supervision of the government.

A case can also be made that Arendt's agonistic spirit, rather than a Habermasian kind of rational concern for the common good, pervaded the Umbrella Movement. We have seen that Habermas' conception of the emergence of the public sphere is historically closely related to its opposition of absolutist government. And while none of the protesters of the Umbrella Movement were particularly enamored by the Chinese state, only few of them were motivated by the idea of contesting the sovereignty of China over Hong Kong (Yeung, 2014). Exactly what the primary goal of the movement was, was never explicitly clear – rather, different groups had different ideas on where to take the protests. Although the name 'Umbrella Movement' makes it sound as if we are dealing here with a uniform group with a strong collective identity, precisely what the movement stood for is contested up to this day and was indeed heavily debated as the protests themselves unfolded. Some wanted the protests to remain peaceful. Others argued that resorting to violence (for example, by breaking into the Central Government Complex) was the only way to draw the attention of those in power (Branigan, 2014). The different groups making up the movement were headed by different representatives who all tried to steer the movement into a certain direction. Some of these groups (mostly those made up of older participants) wanted people to withdraw from the sites as

soon as they felt their point had been made but other groups (mostly those made up of students) urged people to press on until the resignation of the Chief Executive and promises by Beijing it would no longer interfere with Hong Kong's democratic process (Chan, 2014).

In Arendt's terms, the sites making up the Umbrella Movement were artificially constructed places where one could go to be visible. After some time, those opposing the whole movement in the first place also began visiting the sites to have their voices heard. This echoes Blanning's criticism of Habermas that not only the bourgeoisie made up the public sphere but also those wishing to preserve the *status quo*, such as the clergy and the nobility (2002, p. 12). Since the Admiralty site was mainly built on what is normally an extremely busy highway and the Causeway Bay and Mong Kok sites were situated in busy shopping areas, shopkeepers began to see their profits shrink. This caused them to go out on the streets to protest as well. On some instances, the encounters between the shopkeepers and the students even turned violent.

None of the demands of any of the various interest groups of the Umbrella Movement were met in the end. And although this anti-climactic end of the protests left many disillusioned, the students did demonstrate something remarkable. They showed that, contrary to what Walter Lippmann wrote in his 1925 book *The Phantom Public*, the public is not a mere figment of the imagination of naive democrats. Lippmann's argument still haunts us today, when faith in the public, at least in the West, seems altogether lost and politicians and public intellectuals alike consistently fail to find the mechanisms triggering public engagement. But Lippmann's argument is demonstrated by the protests in Hong Kong to be too simple: there are not only 'agents' (those who actually make policy) and 'bystanders' (those who vote every now and then but know nothing of the complexity of problems and only spectate most of the time; 1993, pp. 30-43)). Once a public sphere instantiates itself on a physical location and that location becomes the center of political gravity, the difference between agent and bystander blurs altogether. In fact, one could even argue that the agents *become* the bystanders and vice versa. For a long time, all Hong Kong's officials could do was watch the situation unfold. The fact that the people of Hong Kong were able to instantiate a public

sphere in a physical location to the extent that they did, is a valuable and commendable achievement in and of itself. Here I concur with Arendt that we should appreciate the public sphere to be an end in itself and that it is so potent precisely because it does not serve some other, ulterior end (this would indeed equate it to government). The ultimate goal of the public sphere is to simply be a place where opposing voices can meet to discuss what should be everyone's common concern. The demonstrations were more than mere protests: the people of Hong Kong had managed to shape a lively public sphere that ultimately had to yield to the pressure of raw state power.

To make up the balance of this section, the Umbrella Movement can be characterized as a public sphere because: 1) it had a physical location, namely the Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok sites; 2) it was a place where common interests were discussed by people with a whole spectrum of private interests; 3) people were in principle each other's equals, since the voice of a student had the same weight as that of a shopkeeper or a government official, at least for as long as they remained at the sites; and 4) the sites making up the movement constituted a realm distinguished from government, as they were not under its direct supervision.

§4 Huang and the Confucian public sphere

Now that I have made my case that the Umbrella Movement can be characterized as a public sphere, I want to move on to the second aim of this paper: establishing that the 17th century Neo-Confucian scholar Huang theorized a public sphere. I do so by applying the fourfold definition of the public sphere developed in the second section. This sets the stage for the next section, in which I show that the Chinese state is interested in nurturing civil society and might turn to a type of Confucianism as envisioned by Huang. Establishing that Chinese traditional thought theorizes a public sphere is important for those struggling in Hong Kong because the protests were voiced in the discourse of Western liberal thought, while the Chinese government stuck to its Marxist-Leninist ideology. If both parties involved realize they can draw on the language of a shared heritage to theorize a public realm in Confucian terms, they may begin to move closer together.

Let me first clear an important obstacle. Confucianism is often considered to be anti-democratic, and, by extension, not in the least interested in fostering (or even capable of conceptually allowing for) anything resembling a public sphere. One of the most damning evaluations of Confucianism in this regard has been voiced by Samuel Huntington, who wrote that '[a]lmost no scholarly disagreement exists regarding the proposition that traditional Confucianism was either undemocratic or antidemocratic' (1991, p. 24). On the same page, he continues:

> Classic Chinese Confucianism […] emphasized the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights. Confucian societies lacked a tradition of rights against the state; to the extent that individual rights did exist, they were created by the state. Harmony and cooperation were preferred over disagreement and competition. The maintenance of order and respect for hierarchy were central values. The conflict of ideas, groups, and parties was viewed as dangerous and illegitimate. Most important, Confucianism merged society and the state and provided no legitimacy for autonomous social institutions at the national level (Ibid.).

The problem with Huntington's account, however, is that it simplifies the matter. While 'traditional' and 'classic' Confucianism may indeed be inhospitable to democracy and its institutions, the tradition is sufficiently rich to have developed into what is called Neo-Confucianism at the beginning of the second millennium. Early Confucian political philosophy as propagated by Confucius (551-479 B.C.) himself relied heavily on the idea that a metaphysical principle called *tian* (heaven) was the ultimate source of law. Moreover, Confucius thought that the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.) had managed to establish a good system of governance that those living in the present should try to emulate (Yao, 2000, pp. 21-26). Human institutions were thus thought to be worthless unless brought into compliance with the will of heaven and the ways of the ancients. In line with Huntington's criticism, in practice this meant that those in power could rule arbitrarily, since they could always resort to the argument that they were merely carrying out the will of heaven. Buddhism and Taoism eventually challenged Confucian ideas and ultimately pushed it into a state of decline. From the 11th century onward, Neo-Confucian scholars success-

fully triggered a renaissance of Confucianism by reinterpreting it. It is this tradition that would dominate East Asian thought until the introduction of Western ideas at the end of the 19th century (Ibid., p. 96-98). Neo-Confucianism produced numerous thinkers that strike us as progressive and liberal – and Huang is most certainly one of them.

The 17th century that Huang was part of, was a particularly turbulent one in Chinese history. In his time, he witnessed the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and saw the establishment of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) by the Manchus. Huang remained loyal to the Ming refugee regime and never accepted Qing rule, especially since the Manchus themselves were ethnically not Chinese. His *magnum opus*, the *Mingyi Daifanglu* (明夷待訪錄; translated in 1993 by Wm. Theodore de Bary as *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*) does not, *pace* Huntington, defend autocratic rule but instead condemns it. Where classic Confucianism stressed only heaven was a legitimate source of law, Huang was innovative in that he advocated the need for human laws and institutions. He reminded the rulers that to rule is a burden, not a gift. A ruler is first and foremost a servant of the people, rather than the other way around. Huang thought up a political structure that would prevent the prince from becoming an autocratic ruler. He placed emphasis on the idea that the prince should pay heed to public opinion by regularly paying visits to the schools, where he was to debate his policies with society's most educated people.

If we are going to look for a theoretical starting point of a Confucian public sphere, Huang is a promising person to begin with. De Bary seems to concur in his introduction; his translation of the *Mingyi Daifanglu* appeared in the same year as Wakeman's article and (not surprisingly) starts with the same pessimistic conclusion that "[w]ords like 'despotism' and 'tyranny' may be out of fashion among social scientists, but not among those who still protest the June 4 crackdown and feel strongly about the deprivation of human rights" (1993, p. 2). De Bary's motivation in translating the book is to show that Chinese history is not all about authoritarianism and tyranny but has also produced its fair share of liberal thinkers (Ibid., p. 3). In what follows, I use De Bary's interpretation of Huang's work to show that Huang does conceptualize a public sphere of the form that I defined in the second section. Let me restate this definition here: the public sphere can be *at least*

characterized as 1) a physical location where 2) matters of common interest can be discussed by 3) individuals that are in principle each other's equals in 4) opposition to, or a realm that is sharply distinguished from, government.

Regarding 1), the Huangian public sphere has a very clearly defined location: the schools. Precisely Huang's discussion of the role of the schools is what he is most known for among sinologists. The problem with China's schools, Huang argued, was that they were serving only a single purpose: getting students ready for the civil service examinations. Schools were thus used by the government to train its own officials. Huang lamented the careerism and the lack of general knowledge this fostered among entire generations of students. He attempted to show that in classical times (that is, during the Zhou Dynasty) schools were centers of all important community and state activities, and that they '...had a major role too […] *in debating public questions* and advising the prince. Ideally, then, schools should serve the people in two ways: providing an *education for all* and acting as organs for the *expression of public opinion'* (Ibid., p. 31; emphasis added).

As for 2), the public sphere is a place where matters of common concern can be discussed, it is precisely in the schools that matters of common concern are meant to be discussed. But not only are schools, according to Huang's plan, supposed to be centers of critical debate. The prince is also meant to rule from them. When the prince rules from his palace, he is surrounded only by those who wish to rise through the ranks by pleasing him. Here I remind the reader of the example of the table given when I discussed Arendt's notion of artificiality: the space from where people rule determines the way they rule. Without anyone to oppose them, princes come to think that their rule is absolute. When they instead rule from the schools, princes will constantly have to defend their views against the scrutiny of the scholars. Huang even goes as far as proposing that each month, the prince and his ministers should attend a scholarly discussion on important questions – not as participants, but as students (Ibid., p. 33)!

That people are each other's equals in the Huangian public sphere, as per 3), is guaranteed by Huang in two ways. First, the prince and his ministers are in no way hierarchically superior to the scholars. In fact, we have already seen that the prince is rather supposed to be the servant of the people. Second, to Huang, equality of the people in the public sphere goes

hand in hand with providing a universal education for all. He may not allow the uneducated to participate in the public sphere but he compensates for this by making education available to all, especially those with talent. Such universal schooling is supposed to be a means of "[...] promoting the people's self-development, expanding their human resources and enlarging the number of those who could, in an informed way, participate in the cultural and political life of the society" (Ibid., p. 35). In this, Huang stands closer to Habermas than to Arendt: the public sphere comes with rules and has an inherent rationality. Those who do not know the rules or do not agree with its rationality, cannot participate. The fact that education is required to enter the Huangian public sphere means that he is not a full democrat; the public sphere he theorizes is rather republican. Similar to Habermas' public sphere (and this has often been leveled as a critique against him; see Fraser: 1990), Huang's is exclusive in nature.

The Huangian public sphere is also not, unlike Arendt's, an end in itself. His public sphere is ultimately strongly tied to government and serves to fulfill certain political goals, namely those dictated by Confucianism itself. This has certain consequences for 4), that the public sphere is a realm sharply distinguished or opposed to government. While a case can certainly be made that the Huangian public sphere is a realm that is separate from government, it in no way is meant to oppose it. Freedom of expression and diversity of opinion are not ends in themselves – these are means through which Huang ensures that those best qualified, gain authority. This authority has to make sure that the values central to Confucianism are upheld, so that society edges closer to the normative ideal laid out by the classical rulers of the Zhou Dynasty. Huang would also be inclined to ban forms of 'superstitious belief' (De Bary, 1993, p. 35). Huang is thus not very appreciative of difference and not all matters can be an object of discussion. It is here that Huntington's evaluation might expose a central weakness of even the most liberal form of Confucianism: it does not sharply distinguish society from the state and therefore has no means to truly legitimize autonomous institutions. The state is ever-present in the capacity of the upholder and promoter of Confucianism and its primary role is to shape society in accordance with Confucian values which are not up to debate. The Huangian public sphere thus seems to primarily serve government, rather than oppose it.

The previous suggests that Huang ultimately does not conceptualize something that can be recognized in terms of the public sphere as defined in my fourfold definition. However, I think it would be too drastic to conclude that Huang does not theorize a public sphere at all. Only as a normative model (that is, as an ideal) can the public sphere ever be perfectly opposed to government or neatly separated from it. There is a dynamic between the two that make them mutually implicative. The fact that Habermas and Arendt, too, seek their normative model in a place and time long gone by means they (however faintly) realize this simple truth. That is to say, only in a perfect world (the bygone world of the Greeks or the coffee houses of the emancipating bourgeoisie) is there such a thing as a sphere into which government does not interfere. Huang's public sphere, similar to Habermas' and Arendt's, institutionalizes a platform for critical debate and encourages people to concern themselves with public affairs – including policy decisions by their government. That Huang ultimately does not theorize a public sphere that stands in perfect opposition to, or functions completely autonomously from, government can also be interpreted as Huang's realism: people need government and the public sphere is not there to contest government itself but rather its policy decisions.

§5 Confucianism as a civil religion

This leaves me with one last aim: to demonstrate that the Chinese state is interested in developing Confucianism as a civil religion and that it is at least plausible it would consider endorsing the kind of progressive Confucianism Huang espouses. So far, my paper has been mostly theoretical, but theoretical plausibility is of little comfort to those struggling to defend the value of a strong public sphere in China. Are there any hopes that the idea of the public sphere will gain currency in China in the near future?

While the camps set up by the protesters of the Umbrella Movement formed a public sphere and opposing groups met each other to discuss their differences, representatives from one important party were not at all present: the Chinese state. The Chinese state has effectively chosen to ignore the entire Umbrella Movement and let the local Hong Kong government deal with the protests. The Beijing Spring and the Tiananmen

Square protests undoubtedly taught the Chinese state to be extremely reluctant of giving in to demands for liberalization, since it knows such a course is currently likely to undermine state power. At the same time, however, recent developments show signs that the Chinese state itself is interested in nourishing civil society by means of an intellectual tradition of which it can claim to be its own: Confucianism.

What are these signs? As Kang Xiaoguang writes, China's market-oriented reforms have brought great wealth to the country, but this wealth typically disappears into the pockets of the elites who hold all economic and political power. Extreme income inequality and corruption have been the result of economic reform, thereby contributing to the bankruptcy of the official ideology. While the Chinese government has tried to save Marxism in any way it can (a strategy that is now increasingly becoming difficult to credibly maintain), it has at the same time also turned to new sources of thought. In recent years, the Chinese government appears to have become an active stimulator of a renaissance of Confucianism (Kang, 2012, pp. 39-41). That the Chinese government is indeed serious about Confucianism was proven when in January 2011, a thirty-one-foot bronze statue of Confucius had suddenly been erected in front of the National History Museum on Tiananmen Square. The statue had equally suddenly vanished on April 21 that same year (Sun, 2016, p. 86). Although the disappearance of the statue is shrouded in mystery, it is significant that the Chinese Communist Party would allow a cultural (and to some, religious) symbol not affiliated with communism to be put on the country's most important square, for all Chinese citizens to see.

If these signs are in fact true indicators of the ambitions of the Chinese state, then Confucianism might present itself as a way to overcome the ideological differences that currently prevent a dialogue between the protesters of the Umbrella Movement and the representatives of the Chinese government from even happening. Since I have shown that the idea of the public sphere can be legitimized within the Confucian tradition to a significant extent, there is additional hope for the people of Hong Kong and the people of China that the official recognition of Confucianism as a civil religion will lead to more progressive governance. However, it has to be asked here why the Chinese state would be interested in a Confucianism as

progressive as Huang's, when it can also choose to nurture a more classical Confucianism that allows it to preserve its current autocratic ways. I here echo Anna Sun's worries that Confucianism, as soon as it becomes fully endorsed by the Chinese state, might degenerate from a civil religion into a state religion (2013, p. 178). As a state religion, Confucianism may end up being nothing more than a tool for the state to teach people obedience to authority.

While the Chinese state is a highly unpredictable political entity and what I write in this section must therefore remain speculative in nature, I do not think the Chinese government would display an interest in developing an autocratic form of Confucianism when this quite obviously contradicts with its interest in nurturing Confucianism in the first place. That is to say, endorsing autocratic Confucianism makes little sense when precisely the Chinese state's current autocratic ways are the root of the problem. By creating room for a civil religion, the Chinese state hopes to provide the Chinese with a moral compass – one that does not depend solely on state power to be enforced. Corruption runs rampant when officials do not feel like they have to answer to anybody and do not feel responsible for the community they are a part of. Huang envisions precisely the kind of communities, centering around the schools as centers of debate and moral gravity, that could help the Chinese state battle corruption, not only at the top but also at the local level. I therefore think that a Chinese turn to civil society and an accompanying appreciation of a Huangian kind of Confucian public sphere, is not at all unlikely in the nearby future.

§6 Conclusion

I began this paper by providing a fourfold definition of the public sphere through a discussion of Arendt and Habermas. In the third section, I scrutinized the case of the Umbrella Movement using the analyses of Arendt and Habermas and concluded that the Umbrella Movement can indeed be characterized as a public sphere when applying the fourfold definition provided at the end of section two. This model again served me in section four, where I demonstrated that Huang comes close to conceptualizing a public sphere. Finally, in the fifth section, I argued that the Chinese state,

if it is going to develop Confucianism into a civil religion at all, will more likely nurture a kind of progressive, Huangian Confucianism than a classical, autocratic form of Confucianism.

What does this all mean for Hong Kong? In the introduction, I wrote that those involved with the Umbrella Movement should promote the need for a strong public sphere, instead of solely focusing on full democratization. The Chinese state is unlikely to give in to demands for more autonomy (since this may trigger more cries for independence in other areas of the country) but may realize it needs to nurture civil society in order to combat certain problems facing today's Chinese society. However, there is also the problem of discourse. The people of Hong Kong, having been part of a Western power for so long and not sharing the mainland's educational system, are used to voicing political demands in the language of Western liberalism. They almost appear to assume that democracy is by default the best form of government. Needless to say, the Chinese state does not share this view. In a time when China is asserting its own identity in opposition to the Western democratic powers, it may be wise for the people of Hong Kong to search for an alternative way of reaching out to the Chinese state. The intuition guiding this paper has been that the two parties can draw on a shared tradition that at least holds the promise of satisfying the political needs of both. In the case of the Chinese state, a tradition it can claim to be its own (thus enforcing Chinese national identity) and that also provides it with ways of nurturing civil society. For the people of Hong Kong, a tradition that is not all about autocratic rule but also about listening to the critical input of the educated citizenry. If the gap between the two political entities, that currently operate on the 'one country, two systems' principle, can be closed by a Confucian reorientation of values before 2047, then the transition to 'one country, one system' may not be as problematic as it is currently made out to be.

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Notes

1. See also Cheek, 2015, pp. 217-259.

2. Following convention, Chinese names are written with the family name coming first. Henceforth, I will refer to Huang Zongxi as 'Huang'.

3. For an example of this, see the 2015 article in The Washington Post, titled "Possible kidnappings of Hong Kong booksellers put 'one country, two systems' in peril", accessible online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/possible-kidnappings-of-hong-kong-booksellers-put-one-country-two-systems-in-peril/2016/01/05/e0356690-b3d5-11e5-a76a-0b5145e8679a_story.html

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