

УДК 82:1(510)

DOI 10.18101/2306-753X-2016-2-24-31

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An Analysis of Chinese Traditional Hermits from the Perspective of Philosophy

The group of hermits is a special philosophical object attracting much attention, and its culture is also a unique phenomenon in Chinese history. The hermit is an intellectual who is hiding from the bustle world and may not fit with the major value system. Thus, as a hermit, they first lead a simple life without much social contact with the outside world, and then they are intellectuals having not only the idiosyncrasy of “hiding” but also their own spirit carried on generation after generation. This paper is a discussion on the essence and spiritual idiosyncrasy of “hiding” and “intellectual” starting from the logic generation of “hiding”, and then a precise interpretation of the feature of “hermits” as a cultural phenomenon based on observation of their history.

Keywords: hermit, hermit culture, hermit philosophy, traditional culture.

中国传统隐士之解读

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“隐士”是中国历史上一直上备受关注的特殊群体，隐士文化更是中国历史上一道独特的风景。作为“隐士”，首先在于“隐”，而后才是“士”，不仅具备“隐”的特质，同时也一脉相承“士”的精神内涵。文章从“隐”的逻辑生成入手，探究了“隐”与“士”的本质内涵和精神特质，在考察“隐士”历史源流的基础上，准确地阐释了“隐士”这一文化现象的特质。

关键词：隐士；隐士文化；隐士哲学

The group of hermits is a special philosophical object attracting much attention, and it is also an eternal topic of Chinese traditional culture. The hermit can be literally interpreted as *a hiding intellectual*, which indicates an intellectual who is hiding from the bustle world and may not fit with the major value system. The image of hermits in the history has always been philosophical, graceful, peaceful and noble. According to statistics from JIANG Xingyi, a scholar of Chinese drama history, from the ancient time of Yao and Shun (in legends) to Republican period (1912-1940), more than some ten thousand hermits have been recorded in various kinds of literature^[1]. After examining official history books and reading literature of modern writers, it is observed that the criteria of discriminating hermits are ambiguous in academia. There are different items, so there should be different names (*the Biography of Yinyi of Songshu*, Yinyi is a hermit in Song Dynasty, 960-1279 B.C.). Therefore, it is necessary to grasp the essence and idiosyncrasy of both “hiding” and “intellectual” so as to further discuss the feature of “hermits” as a cultural phenomenon.

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1. The Logic Generation of “Hiding”

There are a great number of hermits in Chinese history. Throughout these numerous hermits, the essence of “hiding” turn to blur on account of different scopes of it and various ways it is represented. Ultimately, the definition of “hiding” in academia appears to be vague and ambiguous, and the criteria of it cannot reach unanimous for scholars have their own judgments. As far as the author is concerned, it is obvious that the so-called hermits should be marked and discriminated firstly by its most typical idiosyncrasy of “hiding”. However, what is the definition of “hiding”?

From the comprehensive history of hermits, it can be told that “hiding” was initially regarded as a kind of isolated life, and both living a secluded life and being ethical as well as competent are criteria of real “hiding”. Hermit means an ethical person who lives in seclusion - YAN Shigu (581-645 A.D.), a well-known economist, philologist and historian in Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), noted the term in *Book of Han*, and this expressed exactly the same meaning. XU Shen (58-147 A.D.), an economist and writer in the East Han Dynasty (25-220 A.D.), explained “hermits” in another way in his book *Origin of Chinese Characters*, which was noted by DUAN Yucai, an economist and philologist in Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), as the following: to hide the child because he is not good enough to be exposed and supposed to be educated in private^[2]. “Hiding” was interpreted as “minuteness” in *Erya* (the earliest dictionary in ancient China). No matter to be educated in private or minuteness, they both have the meaning of isolation from the outside world. Therefore, many scholars think that a hermit is a person who would not pursuit power^[3]. However, this is not scientific. “Hiding” should be illustrated from the following two aspects:

Firstly, “hiding” is a symbol and a potential identification from the point of view of its manifestation. According to recorded biology in the history, one thing in common with all the hermits is that they have similar life experience, so when you read the biology of one, the others’ would be familiar. Besides, every biology of the hermit is written in the same pattern with a certain diagram, and in different period of time they have a similar internal connection. Even though hermits’ images change or vary, the common life style and behavior pattern of them are constant, such as filial piety, witness, modesty and politeness. Therefore, “hiding” is only a potential identification of individual without absolute discrimination of superior or inferior.

In addition, “hiding” is compared to what is exposed. That is to say, what is hidden is the ideology and value on the opposite of the major ideas, and they are mainly the internal knowledge and humanity of people, which are not recognized by public at a certain time. Such ideas of Taoists as being free, unconventional and distinct were not widely agreed by the society then, however, they still live on the history and spread by people due to their special charm. Meanwhile, during human being’s practice of creating their culture and cultivation in the past thousands of years, this has forged their spirit of being-towards-death as well as the responsibili-

ty and competent of retrieving and strengthening their spiritual home facing the threat of living. The prerequisite of this is to comprehensively examine and reestablish the value of existence from the perspective of human nature, and to build the historical responsibility for the existence and development of life. As the need for this process in complex and changeable, thus always moving forward is the top sense of life force. This is a motivation not only promoting the growth and development of life but also the civilization and improvement of human beings. Also, the meaning of “hiding” covers many features of the spirit of Chinese intellectuals in ancient time, for example, they are willing to suffer from poverty in order to pursue their high ideals, they are distinct from the ordinary people and they live a simple but elegant life; they love reading and devote to composition; their final purpose is to achieve a leisure and elegant life.

Overall speaking, the manifestation of “hiding” is a practical behavior while the essence of it is an appealing value. In other words, practical behavior is the realistic basis to measure what is “hiding”, and as ideas control the behavior, the appealing value is an idea. Thus, the essence of “hiding” is that the positive motivation of “hiding” is the appealing value reflected by ideas. Therefore, during the 5 thousand Chinese history, various hermits as well as their ideas and appealing values gather together and build the splendid hermit culture in Chinese traditional society.

2. The Essence and Idiosyncrasy of “Intellectual”

From the meaning of hermits, “hiding” alone is unable to explain the definition of it. Therefore, many scholars would refer to “intellectual” while researching on hermits and revealing their idiosyncrasy based on this. In ancient China, “intellectual” is a very complicated group and continuously changing concept. “Intellectual” actually means being able to manage things, said XU Shen (ici.) in *Origin of Chinese Characters*. People doing well in what they are doing can be called intellectuals^[4], DUAN Yucai (ici.) noted. He defined “intellectual” as a cultivated and responsible man. There are hundreds of appellations and special nouns related to “intellectuals” in the literature from Pre-Qin Dynasty (21st century-221 B.C.). It turned out that “hiding” came up as early as the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.), but was simply taken as bottom aristocracy of the ruling class under the patriarchal clan system of Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 B.C.).

From the source of “intellectual”, most scholars agreed that it came up from a disordered period of time in Spring and Autumn Warring States. The disappearing inherent social order and the frequent social class mobility offered social conditions for the formation of “intellectual” as an independent social stratum. So by the end of the period of Spring and Autumn, “intellectual” has evolved into a profession to analyze and spread protocol without the coat of noble. “Nine academic schools of Pre-Qin came from the officials’ group in the imperial government”^[5]. Collapse of the feudal order in Zhou Dynasty turned the official in charge of music into a folk “intellectual” of private schools, and especially the idea of being an official in the Confucian school took the dominant position for a long time. This was mainly due to the trend of Confucius’ founding private schools, which ended

the era of learning in government and provided a suitable cultural environment for the rapid growth of literati class. Besides, all the small states at that time wanted to become strong in the competition, thus, this provided a wider space for those “intellectuals” to work. So the intellectuals became the most active political force in the political arena. This is just “lobbyists” proposed by YU Yingshi. According to this standard, it could be said that almost all scholars in the Pre-Qin times can be called “lobbyists”, that is, traveling among small states and proclaiming his idea about governing the country. When Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.) and Han Dynasty (202-220 B.C.) unified the ancient China, “literati” class gradually formed. Whatever lobbyists in Pre-Qin or the “literati and officialdom” after the Qin and Han Dynasties, YU Yingshi, a famous Chinese historian and Sinologist, viewed that they were both special classes bearing the cultural mission, and they played the function of “intellectuals” in Chinese history from the beginning^[6].

YU Yingshi directly matches the “hiding” with the “intellectual” in modern society. On his opinion, from the point of politics and culture, “hiding” is a unique identity in ancient Chinese society, which not only takes the spiritual pursuit of saint, but also bears independent personality and individual subjectivity functioning as “social conscience”^[7]. “Independent personality” means “individual autonomy and social critical spirit”. XU Jilin, a Chinese historical scholar, gave a detailed explanation from three aspects. First, do not blindly follow or attach to any external spirit authority and the realistic political power. Second, to judge independently according to one’s inner standard of truth and value. Third, actively involved in politics in order to be the independent critical force of reforming society in social practice. What is the most important for intellectuals as the embodiment of “social conscience” is the independence of personality and social critical spirit. In other words, do not give in to any power including political and academic one but commitment to social justice.

It could be said that “intellectual” was a social class existed in the form of traditional “man of knowledge” in China. Its independence seems obvious, and mainly displays in the following three aspects. First, “aiming high”, which means conform to one’s inner rule, also equals to independent value judgment; second, do not succumb to the self judgment and independent consciousness of political power; third, the sense of social responsibility and critical spirit, “serving country as one’s duty”. “Intellectuals’ aim high” is the basic direction Confucius regulated for Chinese scholars. After then, “Taoism” has become Chinese scholars’ persistence and pursuit. When inherited the idea of Confucius, Mencius made a clearer regulation on the character and responsibility of “intellectuals”. He stated in *Analects*, “intellectuals” must aim high, which would be a heavy burden and long way to go. Taking benevolence as their duty, isn’t that heavy? Fighting to death, isn’t that so far?” It means that the basic character of “intellectuals” is to have a broad and strong mind, while their life mission is “to carry forward humane”, which is also the responsibility that “intellectuals” should bear. What does it mean to have a broad and strong mind? ZHU Xi, a scholar devoted to the study of the classics with a

philosophic approach in Song Dynasty, noted that “broad” indicates wideness while “strong” means tolerance. One cannot bear its heaviness without being broad and cannot reach afar without being strong. Wideness without tolerance, it may be difficult for people to stand due to the lack of rules. On the country, tolerance without wideness, it may be impossible to make it on account of the lack of ambition. Only if the combination of being “broad” and “strong” can one take the responsibility and run a long way.” The so-called humane namely justice, is a respected virtue go beyond human relations. In order to carry forward humane, “intellectuals” cannot be addicted to ease and interests. *Analects Xianwen* recorded, “An intellectual who longs to ease cannot match the title”. “Trailblazer never indulges in ease as to harm humane,” ZHANG Zai, an ideologist and educationist in North Song Dynasty (960-1127 A.D.), wrote in *Zhengmeng-Youde*. Aside from this, “intellectuals” even need to devote his life to protecting humane. *Analects-Zizhang* stated, “intellectuals” takes mission in front of danger and considers loyalty facing profit.

Chinese intellectuals’ pursuit and persistence of “Taoism” was reflected as a self judgment and independence sense of not giving in to the political power in political practice activity. In fact, under the monarchy system, the result of “intellectuals” can be concluded into two approximate kinds. One is to become a scholar, and the other is to become an official. Being a scholar is to inherit and carry forward classics, and comment on the past and present. It is similar in distinguishing the truth and the falsity both in the past and at present, LIU Xiang, an economist and litterateur in West Han Dynasty (220 B.C.-8 A.D.), has stated in *Shuo Yuan*. Intentional scholars take the position of Confucian orthodox, adhere to Confucian orthodoxy higher than that of the authority of the political rule, and often propose some criticism or challenges of regime. To rely on reality and regime of the ruling class is exactly the practical way for an intellectual to be an official. Only intellectuals can live without permanent treasure but perseverance, Mencius said in *Teng-wengongxia*, “What official means to an intellectual is like plough to a farmer.” It means that being an official to an “intellectual” is like the farmland to a farmer, both are a kind of profession. “Intellectuals” should actively participate in politics and serve people. When the official “intellectuals” directly face the realistic political power, they still ought to reflect independent spirit and character of “Intellectuals”. When justice was covered, and freedom of speaking was deprived, the independence of “intellectuals” could be presented in prowling the mountain forest instead of colluding with the powerful, namely what Mencius said, “As justice prevails, cultivate your character with it. As justice fades, dedicate your life to it.”

“To serve the country as one’s duty” represents the independent character of an “intellectual”, and this is also the sense of social responsibility, which means active participation in world affairs and is trying to play a leading role. As having the will of regarding the ups and downs of the country as one’s own duty, of course, people would enjoy a strong independent personality.^[9] Indeed, From Confucius’ making regulation to stand on the basis of Taoism, “intellectual” was not just limited to Taoism of “self-cultivation”, but also turned to the Taoism of “governing

the country”. Self-cultivation is to cultivate one’s morality, which means the “surface of Tao”, however, governing the country is to oblige the world, which indicates a “deep meaning of Tao” related to the world lives. Therefore, a real intellectual in poverty does not lose loyalty while in rich he does not deviate from Tao. Being poor without losing loyalty, intellectuals stick to themselves. Being rich without deviating from Tao, people would not be upset. The ancient people, if succeed, imposed benefits on the people; once frustrated, cultivate one’s morality to live in the world. Being poor, just cultivate one’s morality. Being rich, then oblige the world (*Mencius Jinxinzhangjushang*).

In a word, an “intellectual” ought to care people all over the world rather than their own interests. Conforming to Tao and respecting conscience is the spiritual personality that traditional Chinese intellectuals persist, and the spirit of “taking responsibilities with an iron shoulders” is still very precarious until now.

3. What is a “hermit”?

The term of “hermit” first appeared in *Xun Zi·Zheng Lun*, saying that “there is no hermit in the world” referring “people who live in seclusion.” This explanation is consistent with that in *Cihai*. According to the literature, countless people live in seclusion in all ages of China, but not all of them can be called hermits. As it is said in *Yijing Zhouwenwangpian*, “Heaven and earth do not change, while the sage live in seclusion.” In *Nanshi·Yinyi*, it was also stated that hermit “must be cultivated and skilled”. In other words, hermit is a “sage” and a scholar-bureaucrat who is so knowledgeable and talented but unwilling to be an official, however, they are definite not average people.

Hermits have experienced a long history. Jieyu, Changju, Jieni, Helizhangren etc. recorded in *Analects* are all famous hermits. Since modern times, JIANG Xingyu’s *Chinese Hermit and Chinese Culture* is the first domestic work systematically studying hermit, which almost totally denied the thought of hermits and social values of their existence. JIANG Xingyu believed that the emergence of hermit due to individualism or defeatism from a subjective view, but an escape from the objective angle. And he exclaimed, “What the fun of life is as it is of no benefit to the society, to the country, to human beings.” Obviously, this misunderstanding originated from not being truly clear about what a hermit is.

Regardless of the ancient or modern time, judgments on hermit are mixed. Some scholars even judge its reputation and influence by the honorable way “hermit” was treated. Because there were picked imperial edicts in many hermits’ documents. Empire of all dynasties tended to respect hermits, and took it as “a tool to create the image of enlightened monarch and political administrations”. For example, Songxiaowu Emperor’s edict spoke highly of WANG Su and ZHU Bainian, famous hermits at that time, “being integrity and honest, they take a soft attitude to life, and live a self-sufficient life with firm determination.” Besides, Songshu·Yinyizhuan pointed out, “they should be praised for doing that.” It could be concluded that before the empire declared the edict, the identity of hermits had been actually recognized, widely circulated in the folk, and was taken as basis by

the feudal official to appoint. In other words, hermits that had long been recognized by the social public opinions, only improve their popularity or reputation through the activities. Without approval from the government, social prestige judgment of the person would sharply decline. So hermit is a double construct identity by the people and society. Meanwhile, during the process of accepted by all groups in society, "It gradually sublimated into a symbol of meaning and value of resources."

Domestic scholars generally defined hermit in the framework of bureaucracy, and a widespread view is that "Scholars seclusion instead of being an official." Foreign scholars is totally another way, generally define it in view of religious beliefs, supposing that isolate oneself from others out of religious motivation, in other words, cultivate oneself by isolating from others can be called a hermit. It could be seen that the form of hermit is various, no matter take "not being an official" as the fundamental characteristics, or employ "cultivate oneself alone" to explain the connotation of hermit, it is one-sided and differing from the hermit elaborated in the thesis.

TANG Degang said, "Ambition and promise is the connectivity of Chinese traditional intellectuals. Hermit, as a connotative intellectual, must have the ambition, which is of course related to future. When the future is uncertain, they obviously must stick to the aim. In fact, hermit is a part of "intellectuals" class, and more accurately the excellent one in "intellectuals"." YU Yingshi did not take all of the "intellectuals" as scholars, and he thought that "intellectuals" was an important historical source of scholars. As a "hermit," firstly centered on "hiding" and then "intellectuals"," not only takes the character of "hiding" but inherits the spiritual connotation of "intellectuals"." Hermits, a special group in intellectuals, refer to "scholars" that live outside the subject and cannot match the mainstream value system, and present super talent as well.

In fact, a man's life belongs to the individual and society as well, and individual's life is beyond that of society. Hermit's pursuit is beyond the category of social life, freely getting along with heaven and earth, a truly life belong to their own. It could be said that no hermit recorded in history was really unknown, living in mountain all their lives, and never presented their talent. Thus, the standard of judging a hermit cannot simply rely on whether he seclusions, being an official, or on his religious belief. What is more important is its ideology and social value orientation, in other words, he deviates from the dominant values in society at the time, and not accepted by others. But as time flies, it was recognized by descendants and honored as a priceless heritage of ideology and culture.

Thus, the true hermit is free from the system of political power, and is an excellent intellectual that owns knowledge and morality. Outstanding and tolerant character is the external representation, while ease and indifference to fame and wealth is its inherent identity. Hermit cultivates himself with morality and etiquette, and plays a significant role in the development of social culture and maintaining social order. Whether be an official or not, hide or not, be religious or secular, this can be called a hermit. The judgment standard mainly lies in if its social

value concept has a lasting influence. In thousands of year's Chinese history, hermits have made remarkable achievements whether in the field of literature, art, philosophy or science and so on. Because they were the inheritances and practitioners of Chinese culture, and were cultivating in a special way.

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