

Under Western Eyes: Critical Reflections on the Confucius Revival

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Abstract

The economic opening up of China has paved the way for a renaissance of thought and scholarship, and Confucianism, while still not considered the “national religion,” has regained its place as the heart of Chinese humanities and academic debate. It has even transcended the academic arena and has become a social phenomenon. But to what extent is this resurgence a natural response to a changing society, the response of a populace that is possibly growing averse to looking toward the West for answers, and to what extent is it politically driven? When put in its proper historical and cultural context, we can see that this revival of Confucian thought and of Confucius as a national idol is very much a tool wielded by the government to promote its own goals, namely, to foster a stronger sense of national identity, unity, and obedience under the name of harmony. Now that China’s modernization has become a fact, many questions remain regarding how its government and its society will reconcile modernization and Westernization with its rich Confucian heritage. This paper aims to elucidate some of these questions.

Keywords

Confucianism – revival – modernization – ideology

The Confucius Revival is undoubtedly one of the most noteworthy features of contemporary Chinese cultural and intellectual life. In China today, the signs of Confucius’ popularity are omnipresent. Yu Dan’s nonscholarly

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popularization of Confucian themes, *Lunyu xin de* 論語心得 (*Insights Gleaned from the Analects*), published in 2006 (really, little more than a Confucian-influenced “self-help” book geared toward mass consumption) has turned into something of a cultural phenomenon, selling 10 million copies; of all the works published in the postrevolutionary era, only Mao’s *Little Red Book* has sold more copies. Whereas interest in Marxism seems to be dwindling, enrollments are soaring on Chinese college campuses for courses on Confucianism. During the early 2000s, the then—Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Jintao began to infuse his speeches with unmistakably Confucian themes, stating on one occasion, “Harmony is something to be cherished.” Hu’s remarks implicitly acknowledge the fraying of China’s traditional social fabric amid the rush to modernize as well as the role that Confucian values might play in redressing the attendant imbalances and disruptions. Similarly, in 2007, then—Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made a strikingly similar declaration: “From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen, the traditional culture of the Chinese nation has numerous precious elements, many positive aspects regarding the nature of the people and democracy. For example, it stresses love and humanity, community, harmony among different viewpoints, and sharing the world in common.”¹

One should also recall the memorable spectacle of the opening ceremonies at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, at which drummers clad in ancient dress chanted the opening lines of the *Analects* before a television audience of millions. With similar aims in view, since 2004 the Chinese government has sponsored the opening of numerous Confucius Institutes throughout the world in order to facilitate Chinese language instruction as well as increased familiarity with Chinese cultural traditions. At present, they number over 300. In 2010, a 30-foot statue of Confucius mysteriously appeared adjacent to Tiananmen Square, only to disappear inexplicably a few months later. As this particular incident suggests, the Communist Party leadership is itself highly conflicted about the ease—or difficulty—with which one might reconcile a modernizing creed such as Marxism with Confucianism’s steadfast traditionalism. However, one could also make the argument—as several commentators already have—that Mao’s political voluntarism is related to the Confucian values of self-reliance and self-improvement. However, when all is said and done, one is very much left to wonder whether the great mass of Chinese citizens is more likely to view such attempts at cultural reconciliation between Confucianism and Marxism as conveying mixed signals—hence, ultimately, as more confusing than clarifying.

1 Daniel Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8-9.

Viewed historically, one can date the Confucian revival from the onset of the “culture craze” of the 1980s, a remarkable period of cultural ferment that emerged in response to the Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong in 1966.

In retrospect, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) represented a politically motivated modernization drive that Mao and his followers initiated in order to extirpate the remaining vestiges of Chinese feudalism. Accordingly, one of its prominent themes was the struggle against the “Four Olds”: old culture, old customs, old habits, and old ideas. Since Confucianism was synonymous with traditional Chinese values, during this ten-year period of cultural and political ferment, it became one of the primary targets of criticism. Incalculable damage was done to Confucian relics, artifacts, manuscripts, and cultural sites. These anti-Confucian tendencies became even more acute during the early 1970s, as Mao launched his “Pi-Lin, pi-Kong” (Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius) campaign.

Conversely, the “culture craze,” which began in about 1980, allowed for a flowering of cultural diversity that stood in stark contrast to the Cultural Revolution’s political didacticism. On the one hand, under the banner of the “Obscure Poetry” movement, a new interest in Western-inspired aesthetic experimentation flourished. On the other hand, a broad swath of Chinese intellectuals felt compelled to disregard the Western cultural canon, which often proved extremely difficult to reconcile with indigenous Chinese values and traditions. Thus after the constraints of the Cultural Revolution era had been loosened, the possibility of a reassessment of Chinese traditions re-emerged: an exploration of the “national essence.”

In October 1978, a historic conference took place at Shandong University to reassess Confucius’ legacy. Confucius’ defenders argued that the wholesale rejection of his legacy during the Cultural Revolution had been too extreme. It was now time for a more fair-minded evaluation of his contributions, an assessment that took into consideration positive as well as negative aspects. Six years later, in 1984, another momentous conference took place in Qufu, Confucius’ hometown, to commemorate the 2,535th anniversary of his birth. The culminating event was the unveiling of a statue of Confucius that had been damaged during the Cultural Revolution. With the establishment of the Academy of Chinese Culture and the Chinese Confucian Research Institute the following year, the study of Confucius’ legacy and ideas once again became an acceptable avenue of Chinese cultural life.²

2 For a good account of these developments, see Xianlin Song, “Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The ‘Culture Craze’ and New Confucianism,” in *The New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Since the onset of the opening-up policy, China has felt compelled to borrow cultural and political ideas from the West—an imperative, it seemed, if the Middle Kingdom wished to catch up with its colonial adversaries and prosperous neighbors. However, in recent years the tables have begun to turn. For example, the reevaluation of indigenous Chinese traditions set the stage for the “national studies movement” of the 1990s. Increasingly, Chinese intellectuals and opinion leaders have begun turning to Confucius’ doctrines in their quest for an effective counterweight to the social and moral disequilibrium produced by China’s breakneck pace of modernization. Thus, in recent decades, a broad stratum of Chinese thinkers and literati have similarly concluded that practical remedies for contemporary social ills might be found in political ideals derived from indigenous Chinese traditions, as opposed to Western approaches. In this connection, considerations of cultural nationalism have also played a prominent role. As the political scientist Daniel Bell observes: “China is a rising economic power, and with economic might comes cultural pride. . . . Poised to become a global power, it’s China’s turn to affirm its cultural heritage.”³ The Confucian revival is “motivated by a sense of cultural pride and sometimes also by a concern about a moral or spiritual crisis in today’s China.”⁴

In addition, the Confucian Renaissance has also been fueled by widespread disillusionment with China’s reigning political ideology, Marxism. After all, Marx was a fervent advocate of modern industrialism. In many instances, he supported Western imperialism, since, as an heir to the Enlightenment, he believed that the ethos of “development” contained the key to human betterment. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx famously praised capitalism’s propensity for dissolving all traditional social relationships, which he viewed as obstacles to the implacable march of progress and Enlightenment:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air,

3 Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, x-xi.

4 Stephen Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 11.

all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.⁵

Thus as a man of the nineteenth century, Marx readily adopted the values of scientism and social evolutionism, as is evidenced by the fact that he sought to dedicate *Das Kapital* (*Capital*) to Charles Darwin. In retrospect, it is safe to say that Marx radically underestimated the excesses of modern industrialism—above all, the catastrophic environmental consequences likely to accrue from capitalism's rapacious exploitation of nature. Instead, under the sway of apostles of technocratic utopianism, such as St. Simon and Auguste Comte, he believed that the untrammelled development of the "forces of production" contained the key to human happiness.

All these prejudices caused him to seriously undervalue the benefits of tradition, community, affective solidarity, and "nature," as a source of beauty and solace, as opposed to a source of "raw material" for the maw of the modern factory system. For all these reasons, Marxism's future as the reigning ideology in China has become patently dubious. As one influential commentator has pointedly noted:

Hardly anybody really believes that Marxism should provide guidelines for thinking about China's political future. The ideology has been so discredited by its misuses that it has lost almost all legitimacy in society. In reality, even the "communist" government won't be confined by Marxist theory if it conflicts with the imperative to remain in power and to provide stability and order in society. For practical purposes, *it's the end of ideology in China*. Not the end of all ideology, but the end of Marxist ideology. To the extent there's a need for a moral foundation for political rule in China, it almost certainly won't come from Karl Marx.⁶

Herein lies one plausible explanation for the revival of "political Confucianism." One of Confucianism's unequivocal merits is that, by embracing a "communitarian" ethos, it stands as a potential corrective to the excesses of modernization qua "development"—a cultural palliative with the capacity to set limits on the mentality of possessive individualism that has accompanied China's enthusiastic embrace, in the aftermath of Mao's demise, of the entrepreneurial spirit. (As Deng Xiaoping is alleged to have observed during the 1980s: "To become rich is glorious!") Because of the premium it places on traditional

5 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2008).

6 Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 8. (Emphasis added.)

values, such as family, respect for one's superiors, honesty, duty, and wisdom, Confucianism clearly seems to merit a fresh look.

To be sure, there is something almost quaint, when viewed in a modern context, about Confucianism's reverence for the classics, the Six Disciplines (the *Book of Changes*, *Rites*, *Odes*, *History*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and *Music*), and the joys of itinerant scholarship. This very disjunction raises serious questions about the inherent practicability of "Confucian Socialism" or a "Confucian Socialist Republic," as a viable path for China's political future.⁷ There exists the concomitant risk that, because of Confucianism's emphasis on the pivotal role of a knowledgeable elite—that is, a mandarin caste of qualified scribes or administrators—its political thrust will conflict with or curtail China's tentative efforts toward participatory citizenship.

This limitation of the Confucian political tradition has been an object of concern among prominent representatives of the New Confucianism, such as the influential Taiwanese philosopher Mou Tsung-san (Zongsan; 1905-1994), who sought to reconcile a traditional Confucian perspective with Western approaches, mainly the ethical doctrines of Immanuel Kant. In Mou's view, Kant's moral philosophy, which is guided by the maxim that "The good will is the will which acts from *freedom* and respect for the *moral law*," preserves the dimension of individual autonomy that, in authoritarian political traditions, tends to be subsumed by the demands for social conformity or the "general will." Thus in *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, Stephen Angle remarks appositely that New Confucianism's "combination of historical reinterpretation, openness to and engagement with Western philosophers like Kant and Hegel, and commitment to democracy and the rule of law has . . . made a major impact on the Sinophone academic world." Mou's idea of "self-restriction . . . allows for a reorientation of the relation between individual ethical insight and publicly agreed-upon norms."⁸

Of course, making comparisons between Confucius' doctrines and the central ideas of prominent Western political philosophers is hardly novel. Since Confucius shunned metaphysics and speculative approaches to knowledge in favor of a practical concern with the way that philosophy influences life conduct, his thought has often been compared to that of Western practitioners of "virtue ethics," such as Socrates and Aristotle. In contrast to Plato, both thinkers, like Confucius, held that an excessive preoccupation with philosophical abstractions would befog, rather than clarify, the goals of human practical

7 For example, this idea has been set forth by the New Left thinker Gan Yang. For a discussion, see Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 178.

8 Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, 10.

life. Hence, Confucius' aversion to metaphysics, as well as to magical practices, bespeaks his commitment to the values of "humanism"—another one of his noteworthy affinities with Western intellectual practices. To invoke only one example: Confucius' humanism is represented by his oft-cited claim: "One cannot consort with birds and beasts. If I do not associate with humankind, with whom shall I associate? If the Way prevailed in the world, there would be no need for me to change it."⁹ In other words, wisdom is not an end in itself. Instead, its sole purpose is to benefit and improve the human condition. Its uses above and beyond this goal are, for the most part, idle and superfluous.

One way of understanding the Confucius Revival is that, having successfully made the transition to modernity, China is now seeking to reconnect with its venerable historical roots and traditions. In other words, now that the achievements of the Revolution have been consolidated, it is "ok" to be authentically Chinese once more. Yet in view of the rapid pace of China's modernization in the post-Mao era, one wonders: might not Confucianism serve as welcome and much-needed mollifying cultural influence, reaffirming social bonds and traditions pertaining to family, community, and piety that, in recent decades, have seriously unraveled, as China's one-sided pursuit of Western models of economic and vocational success has threatened to marginalize traditional cultural ideals? By the same token, in the end, how viable and realistic is a return to Confucian values in light of the considerable investment that contemporary China has made in modern patterns of socioeconomic organization? Has a point of no return been reached? And, if so, can the Confucius revival do more than provide window-dressing—in the form of a pleasing cultural veneer—for a breathtaking social and economic transformation that is now irreversible?

Regardless of how one answers these questions, there can be no getting around the fact that, in contemporary China, Confucianism possesses the status of an "invented" rather than an "organic" tradition. Since a direct link to the past has been irreparably severed, Chinese writers, scholars, and political leaders must actively confront the problem of what it might mean to redeploy and adapt Confucian ideals under radically new circumstances. We have already seen how the idea of Confucianism as an "invented tradition" has played a role in Mou Zongsan's efforts to fuse Confucianism with aspects of Western political thought; but it has also played a role in the Communist Party's efforts to selectively employ Confucian slogans in order to cement national unity.

By the same token, we also know that at the time of the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), as the epoch of the Warring States came to a close, Confucianism had forfeited much of its vitality as a living tradition. Instead, it threatened to

⁹ *Analects*, 18:6.

become a doctrine of conformity in its role as an ideological handmaiden to the feudal-administrative state. As one contemporary of the Han court observed: "the Emperor was greatly pleased with the fact that Kung-Sun [an influential Confucian scholar] 'could use Confucian doctrines to adorn the administration of the laws and of official business.'" Thus during the early Han period, "in the actual administrative measures of the state, [the emperors] reverted to the execrated policies of the legalist statesmen of Qin, [and] for purposes of prestige they erected a façade of conformity to 'Confucianism.'"¹⁰

Hence, the essential question remains: what would it mean today to revive Confucianism as a *living tradition*, as opposed to the commonplace, official sloganeering about "harmony," or, conversely, Yu Dan's spurious attempts to dismiss the profundity of traditional Confucian wisdom in favor of the anodyne platitudes and homilies of a modern self-help movement?

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10 H.G. Creel, *Confucianism and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper Torch, 1949), 240.