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On Being Confucians? Confucius, Confucian Traditions, and the Modern Chinese Society

The Master's literary pursuits are heard of, but his words about nature and the Way of Heaven are not.

Analects of Confucius, 5: 12.

The Master said: "When the state is with the Way, be bold in speech and bold in action. When the state is without the Way, be bold in action and be humble in speech."

Analects of Confucius, 14: 4.

The economic and geopolitical rise of China and its neighbours in East Asia during the last three decades represents a crucial watershed moment in world history, creating ‘an eastward shift of power’ and influence with little precedent in modern history.¹ Unlike a series of Western powers that have risen and fallen in prominence over the last five centuries, the nations of East Asia are steeped in unique and heavily Confucian traditions that remain distinct from the philosophical, political, and economic heritage that has framed the development of Europe and its cultural offspring. The success of the countries in this region, particularly in the economic sphere, became so conspicuous as to require certain explanations. In fact, since the early 1980s there has already been much discussion about the role of Confucianism in the rapid modernization of East Asia. Next to a few scholars, most of them from the West rather than from the East, who found Confucianism to be responsible for the region’s economic success, the first among the East Asians to openly and enthusiastically espouse the idea that Confucianism stood behind economic development was Singapore’s statesman Lee Kuan Yew, who has invoked Confucian values, in the guise of ‘Asian values,’ to justify constraints on the democratic process (Chua 1997, p.154). Advocators of China’s authoritarian government often quote Lee to attribute China’s economic growth and relatively stable society to Confucianism (Mo 2003, p.55; Bell 2008, p.16).

However, those more familiar with modern China may ask, isn’t China actually a ‘red Communist regime’ which builds itself upon the philosophy of Karl Max and Lenin? Isn’t it the Chinese Communist Party rather than a ‘Chinese Confucian Party’ (if this exists) that is the ruling party of contemporary China? Isn’t the Communist Party actually anti-Confucian? Some may even recall that Max Weber, one of the earliest scholars to devote serious attention to the relationship between Confucianism and modernity, has singled out Confucianism among major ‘world religions’ as the least conducive to capitalist economic development (Weber 1963, p.269). Such confusions are absolutely understandable given the sophisticated situations in China, a country so large and diverse with such a long history. China specialists in the West often focus their attention on the analysis of certain

branches (e.g. capitalism, civil society, democracy, etc.) that seem to owe their origin to Western roots. Experts in Chinese culture and history, on the other hand, mostly concentrate on historical interpretations of texts, so they ‘gesture at implications for modern society but rarely spell them out in any detail’ (Bell 2008, p.xiv). As far as I am concerned, any sound understanding of China needs to explore both its roots (e.g. culture, history) and its branches (e.g. economics, politics). Therefore, instead of trying to provide simple answers to the above questions I will endeavour to uncover some of the deep and distinctive aspects of Confucianism and to point to its contemporary manifestations. Moreover, I shall demonstrate how traditional Confucian values have shaped the modern Chinese cultural identity, which may hold implications for a more nuanced understanding of China’s economic and political transformations.

Confucianism and its Historical Development

Confucianism is a religious and philosophical tradition dating back 2,500 years in China, which later spread throughout East Asia. Although the man we know as Confucius said he was not a creator but rather a transmitter of older values and traditions, it is fair to consider him the founder of this school (Kong 1962, 7:19). His actual name was Kong Qiu (551-479 B.C.), and he was generally known as Master Kong (*Kongzi*). A more honorific variant of that name, Kong Fuzi, was Latinised by seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries as Confucius. Master Kong was born in 551 B.C. in the small state of Lu in today’s Shandong province in eastern China. His ancestry is not quite clear because of lack of reliable data, but it is probable that there were aristocrats among his forbears. However, as a young man he was, by his own testimony, ‘without rank and in humble circumstances’ (Smith 2009, p.154). The political structure of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 B.C.) had been disintegrating for over two hundred years during his lifetime, and Confucius’ mission was to restore social and political harmony by reviving the moral character of the ruling class and the literate elite, although he was aware that such ideas were

completely at variance with those of his contemporary aristocrats. Confucius was always markedly contemptuous of eloquence and of ornate language, and there is no detailed record that he ever delivered a public lecture (van Ess 2003, pp.2-3). Nevertheless, we know that he spent most of his life teaching and it is likely he was a persuasive speaker. Even today, the magnetism of his personality comes through his words, as documented in the *Lunyu* ('Analects of Confucius'), a collection of Confucius' sayings and anecdotes compiled by his students and students of his students.²

The three major virtues he considered to be the basis of morality were humanity or humaneness (*ren*), ritual propriety (*li*), and filial respect (*xiao*). Humaneness, he said, was the essential goodness and love for others that distinguishes us from other animal species (Kong 1962, 12:22). As his later follower, Mencius, put it, 'to be human is to be humane' (Meng 2006, 'Lilou' b:22). For Confucius, ritual propriety is the necessary outward expression in behaviour of that humanity, and must be consistent with culturally specific norms. Filial respect (*xiao*), or respect for elders, is a naturally-occurring virtue that is the building block of the other virtues. In later centuries filial respect would become by far the best-known Confucian virtue, with both good and bad results.

Ever since the birth of Confucianism around 2,500 years ago, generations of Confucians—such as Mencius (372-284 B.C.) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200)—have long been preoccupied with social and political change. Confucius moved from state to state, looking for opportunities to put his political ideals into practice, but became disenchanted with political life and settled for a teaching career. Several hundred years later, nevertheless, the social and political ideas of Confucius, as documented in the *Analects of Confucius*, proved to be literally world-transforming. After the short-lived Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.), the following Han dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.) abandoned the Taoism and finally adopted Confucianism as its official ideology and political orthodoxy (Yao 2000, pp.81-82). For the next two thousand years, the country's scholars and literati sought to make it more relevant in particular situations with novel features. By the end of the thirteenth century, the whole East Asian region was thoroughly, or at least considerably, 'confucianized' (Duncan 2002, pp.65-67).

At the end of the eighteenth century the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-1796) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) had rejected a request by King George III of

Great Britain to establish trade relations. Britain needed markets for the products of its new industrial revolution. It responded to the Chinese cold shoulder by growing opium in India and selling it illegally in China (Melancon 2003; Lovell 2011). The Opium Wars of the 1840s began a long series of catastrophes for China, including internal rebellions. The last Chinese dynasty fell in 1911 and was replaced by the Republic of China. But the new republic was rife with corruption from inside and military threats from outside, in particular from Japan. In 1949 the Communists won, driving the government of Republic of China offshore to the island of Taiwan. The first three decades of Communist rule in China witnessed the peak of the so-called Cultural Revolution, the premise of which was that virtually everything about China's traditional culture was holding it back from becoming a modern nation-state. High on the list of culprits in this blanket rejection of traditional China was Confucianism.

This brief summary of Chinese history provides the context of the story of Confucianism in China today. Modern Confucianism has engaged in a long process of survival and renovation dating back to the end of the seventeenth century. However, since the advent of modernity in the second half of the nineteenth century, Confucians have fared less well. The arrival of western technology and culture essentially rejected the self-change and self-adjustment preferred by the Confucians, while the collapse of Confucian states in East Asia meant that old Confucianism was no longer vital enough to merge the societies in the new context. In order to survive, Confucian scholars were forced to question why it had lost its political, social, cultural and ideological influence, and whether it could maintain its moral and spiritual bases (Yao 2000, p.264-265).

The Revival of Confucian Values

Since the Confucian retreat from social, political and economic stages in East Asia by the end of the nineteenth century, the Confucian influence has been considerably limited to a small area, seemingly viable only among the traditionally-minded people and merely a subject of philosophical or religious

researchers. Max Weber's claim that Confucianism has hindered the emergence of capitalist economic development has been widely shared by many.³ East Asian countries, for their part, also began to condemn this venerable tradition as they deepened their encounter with the West. Indeed, for the vast majority of East Asians, modernity had come to mean overcoming Confucianism.

This is, of course, only one side of the story. The umbilical cord between the Confucian tradition and modern China, as well as modern East Asia, cannot be easily severed. Various elements of Confucian heritage, in whatever form it may take, have been transmitted to the present, either hidden in Nationalist or Communist doctrines and principles, or implicitly in underlying the whole structure of the Chinese society (Levenson 1958, pp.126-128, 135). The link between Sun Yat-sen's (1866-1925) 'Three Principles of the People' (*sanmin zhuyi*), for instance, and the Confucian version of the 'Grand Unity Society' (*datong shehui*) is so strong that very few people would deny that the former is to some extent a succession of the latter (van Ess 2003, p.7). The Communists, on the other hand, were also highly inspired by the Confucian moral code, so that David S. Nivison (1972) even argued that Chinese Communist ethics at its beginning and Confucianism were not very different in practice, though different in appearance. Hence, this invisible heritage has sown the seed of the revival of Confucianism even after many years of disruption of its tradition.

While the advanced industrialized countries were mired in the vicious cycle of stagnation, and while the Arabic struggled to resist industrialization and democratization, the countries in East Asia continued to flourish through the 1960s and 1970s, as the cases of Singapore, Korea, and Taiwan demonstrate, and as China's progress since the 1980s also shows. Since the 1980s, the awakening consciousness of Confucianism relates to the renewal of culture and the transformation of traditions. During the search for a new form and new interpretation of Confucianism, two aspects are stressed; 'Confucianism as the source of moral values' and 'Confucianism as the structure of a society' (Smart 1989, p. 104) or 'idealistic and cultural Confucianism' and 'dynastic and social Confucianism' (Li 1999, p.129). Hence, while the social and political structure of traditional Confucianism has long been demolished, its idealist values and ethics remain inherent in Chinese

psychology and underline East Asian people's attitudes and behaviour (Tu 1996, p.259).

Today it is evident that Confucianism has been on the rise again in many East Asian countries, although the reasons and motives behind its developing popularity are quite different from one country to another. This has led to much discussion regarding the role Confucianism plays in the modernization of East Asia, particularly in terms of its economics and politics. Those who initially argued that Confucianism held the secret to the region's economic success were mostly Western scholars such as Roderick MacFarquhar, Kent Calder, Roy Hofheinz Jr. and Ezra Vogel. The debate soon expanded beyond the academic circle. Political leaders in East Asia, in particular in Singapore, affirmed the linkage between modernity and Confucianism not only to explain their economic development but also to argue that Confucian values have laid the basis of the political and economic system they erected, which was in many ways superior to that of the West. And this has again stimulated scholarly interest in the topic. For instance, internationally renowned historians, philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists from East Asia and elsewhere participated in a series of conferences from 1998 to 2001 which explored beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries.⁴

Despite the criticism of the relevance of Confucianism and modernization, Confucianism is, however gradually, regaining some of the space it traditionally held in the people's mind. The old tradition may not have gained a new identity, nor may the old political systems and social structures be appreciated again, but Confucian values are no longer disliked, as a hundred years ago, and some of them even become appealing. The combination of Confucian values and modern qualities creates a new title for business leaders in China, the 'Confucian entrepreneurs' (*rushang*), for their demonstration of Confucian values such as humaneness, sincerity and truthfulness (see, for instance, Chen 2007). Along with the new understanding of the nature and function of Confucianism, efforts have also been made to rejuvenate and rehabilitate Confucian institutions, and interest in the Confucian education system is on the increase. For example, after an interval of almost a century, the traditional civil service examination, which bears the dominant mark of Confucian teachings, has partly been adopted as a modern means to recruit civil servants in China (Zheng 2007, p.314). In 2005, the Renmin University in

Beijing even established a ‘College for National Studies’ (*guoxueyuan*), the first of its kind, which might be described as a college for Confucian Classics.

Political Agenda of the Chinese Government

Even the present government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has gotten in on the act. High government officials have attended conferences celebrating the birthday of Confucius, and have acknowledged him proudly as a great contributor to a glorious Chinese tradition – exactly the opposite of the harsh anti-Confucian rhetoric of the early twentieth century and the recent past. But this explicit government support must be understood in a political context. The ruling party has, over the past twenty years or so, been strongly promoting Chinese patriotism or nationalism. This occasionally gets away from them, for instance when people have taken to the streets to demonstrate against some perceived insult to China by Japan or the USA. The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing were an opportunity for them to strut their stuff on the world stage, and they certainly took advantage of it. One need only recall the opening ceremony, when three thousand drummers played by Confucius’ ‘three thousand students’ chanted the Confucian greeting ‘Isn’t it joyful to have friends coming from distant quarters to visit?’ to show China’s openness to the world (Barr 2012, p.89).⁵

In this context, it seems clear that the PRC government’s support of Confucianism is politically—even geo-politically—motivated. First, they are reclaiming traditional Chinese culture as one of the world’s great civilizations. In fact, there is a wide-ranging strategy of claiming that Chinese civilization was the world’s first great civilization. Second, Confucius, the world-renowned philosopher whose ideas permeated traditional Chinese culture, is now considered as the icon of China. For the past ten years or so the government has sponsored the establishment of Confucius Institutes (*Kongzi xueyuan*) all over the world, including the United States and most European countries.⁶ Along the lines of Germany’s Goethe Institutes and France’s Alliance Francaise, the Confucius Institutes target university students outside China

and are designed to function as educational centres for the study of Chinese language and culture. Such efforts, together with enormous financial governmental supports awarded for study or research stays in China, are physical representations of China's will to promote its culture to the world and are part of China's 'soft diplomacy' to gain a proper stature on the world stage (Bell 2008; Barr 2012, p.89). Third, China's former president, Hu Jintao, has made 'a harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*) his signature socio-political slogan. This is clearly an attempt of the current Chinese state to stifle dissent, which has been constantly boiling up in local demonstrations against government confiscation of property and other local issues (Adler 2011). The fact that 'harmony' (*he*) has been a Confucian watchword since the earliest times suggests that the government views Confucianism as a potential ally in their attempt to maintain 'social stability.'

The latest manifestation of this agenda is actually quite startling. In January 2011, a 31-foot tall bronze statue of Confucius was silently erected in the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It is on the edge of the square, in front of China's recently renovated National Museum on the east side of the square, yet this is interesting since Tiananmen Square was the site of mass rallies at which Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was worshipped and Confucius was condemned and cursed. That very Confucius, who was not so long ago 'Public Enemy Number One' in China, is now regarded as a vivid symbol of China's civilization and greatness. Nonetheless, there still remains the ultimate question: if Confucianism is being revived as either a philosophy or a religion or a school of ideas in China today, who are the Confucians now? Is it the scholars who, like the traditional Confucians of pre-modern China, are engaged in the study of the Confucian Classics, and may or may not engage in Confucian-inspired moral cultivation? Is it the millions of Chinese people who find moral guidance in modern watered-down interpretations of *Analects of Confucius*? Is it those many millions more who just take it for granted that the individual is inextricable from the family, and that it is their obligation to take care of their parents in old age?

The ongoing debates over who are the new Confucians during the past two decades have been invigorating. Admiration for the writings of Confucian scholars of early twentieth-century, including Liang Shuming (1893-1988), Feng Youlan (1895-1990), Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), and Qian Mu (1895-

1990) has been renewed and there has been a reassessment of their thoughts (Lo 1989; Bell 2008). Lately there has also been great interest in philosophers such as Li Zehou and Jiang Qing and their reinterpretations of Chinese traditional thought, especially Confucianism. Outside the East Asian region, experts of intellectual history like Yu Ying-shih, Tu Weiming, and Daniel A. Bell have made great efforts to place these scholars in perspective.⁷ Certainly there is no reason to believe the Confucian orthodoxy that supported dozens of dynastic houses of imperial China will ever be restored to its past role in the modern Chinese state. For most ordinary Chinese, this is becoming ever clearer: state Confucianism belongs to history, while personal Confucianism remains persuasive and compelling among contemporary Chinese people. This may explain the strong ‘Confucius fever’ in China since the past years, as demonstrated in the extraordinary popularity of the book *Lunyu xinde* (‘Reflections on the Analects’) by Yu Dan, a professor of media studies at Beijing Normal University (Barr 2012, p.91). It became a best-seller after its first publication in 2006, with over three millions copies sold in the first four months alone.⁸ The book represents itself as a kind of Chicken Soup for the Soul (Canfield and Hansen 2000), a comfortable collection of bland moral clichés, carefully avoiding any political implications that might challenge the state or encourage dissent.

On Being Confucians?

Instead of offering any direct answer to the question of whether the Chinese today are once more Confucians, these are some of the questions that, as far as I am concerned, need declarations first. For any help or considerations Confucianism may be able to offer us today, we must take a look at such questions from a Confucian perspective. Just as Confucius could not find exact forms to follow in his own present situation and instead searched in a classical legacy for models, what can be learned from a Confucian past may only suggest new possibilities, not provide precise examples. However, even though the Confucian compacts are deemed to be quaint models from a remote past, they could still speak to the contemporary need for some concept of valid and viable

community. When Confucius encountered the problems brought about by social transformations, in particular the loss of a sense of community and the deterioration of family life, he tried to rescue and preserve a family ethic—a moral and social foundation of the earlier hierarchical society—in the midst of a growing political organization through military and bureaucratic means (de Bary 2003, p.368). The political and economic globalization of the contemporary world can be viewed with the same historical perspective, since global capitalism and multinational corporations pose similar problems.

Certainly, this is not to say that in affirmatively answering the question ‘On Being Confucians?’ one should expect Confucius’ teachings to be given a uniquely privileged place in modern Chinese society, but only to ask that it shall have a special place therein. The appeal of Confucius lay not in the later popularization of his ideas, but in how he triumphed over political failure and strove for self-fulfilment in difficult social circumstances. This was vividly summed up in Confucius’s own words as he described the successive stages in his self-development—not a sudden enlightenment or a mystical breakthrough, but a slow culmination of his life-long pursuit:

At fifteen, I set my heart on learning
 At thirty, I established my stand
 At forty, I had no delusions
 At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven
 At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth
 At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing what was right.
 (Kong, Q. [Confucius], 1962, 2: 4)

And one more: returning to the new statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square. If we take a closer look at him, it is interesting to find that he seems to be smiling, but are his eyes closed or open? I haven’t seen the statue in person yet, so I cannot say for certain. But is it possible that Confucius is somehow ambivalent about his gradual rehabilitation in China? I would be if I were him.

Postscript: Four months after the statue was erected, it was mysteriously removed in the middle of the night (Jacobs 2011). The statue now resides in the museum’s sculpture garden outside the square, ostensibly for aesthetic reasons.

Notes

¹ China's rise since the last decades has triggered increasing attention from the media to discuss a shift of power from West to East. See for example O'Grady 2009, Luce 2013; Yu 2013.

² One of the earliest translations of the *Analects of Confucius* in Western languages, and until today the standard one, is provided in Legge 1970.

³ See Ho 2012 for a detailed discussion on the issue.

⁴ The conferences were held in various sites in Korea, ranging from modern Seoul to historical Confucian academies. The proceedings of these conferences appear as an edited volume: Bell and Hahm 2003.

⁵ The sentence is indeed the from the very first passage of the *Analects of Confucius*.

⁶ The Confucian Institutes are mostly affiliated with the host universities in the quest county, jointly headed by two directors, one appointed by the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (*Hanban*) of the Chinese government and one from the guest university. In some educational institutions of relatively smaller size, Confucian Classes (*Kongzi ketang*) are organized; see Hartig 2012.

⁷ One of the latest outcomes of such efforts is the newly published book by Jiang 2013.

⁸ Her work was published under the title *Yu Dan Lunyu xinde* ('Yu Dan's Reflections on the Analects'). In 2009, after selling over ten millions copies, the book was translated into English as *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today's World*.

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