

Preface to the Paperback Edition: Toward a Progressive and Humane Confucian Ethics?

Since the publication of the hardcover of *China's New Confucianism* in 2008, the revival of Confucianism in China has only intensified. But what exactly explains this phenomenon and what makes it so controversial? And what are the challenges of promoting Confucianism in China and the West?

Why the Revival of Confucianism?

Communism has lost its capacity to inspire the Chinese. But what is replacing it? And what should replace it? Clearly there is a need for a new moral foundation for political rule in China, and the Chinese government has moved closer to an official embrace of Confucianism. The 2008 Summer Olympics highlighted Confucian themes, quoting the *Analects of Confucius* at the opening ceremony and in booklets handed out to visiting journalists, and downplayed any references to China's experiment with Communism. Cadres at the newly built Communist Party School in Shanghai proudly tell visitors that the main building is modeled on a Confucian scholar's desk, with the tower representing the power of the word. Abroad, the government has been promoting Confucianism via branches of the Confucius Institute, a Chinese language and culture center similar to France's Alliance Française and Germany's Goethe Institute.

Of course there is resistance as well. Elderly cadres, still influenced by Maoist antipathy to tradition, often condemn any efforts to promote ideologies outside a rigid Marxist framework. But the younger cadres in their forties and fifties tend to support such efforts, and time is on their side. It's easy to forget that the 76-million-strong Chinese Communist

Party is a large and diverse organization. The party itself is becoming more meritocratic—it now selects high-performing students and encourages them to join—and the increased emphasis on the selection of educated cadres is likely to translate into more sympathy for Confucian values.

But the revival of Confucianism is not just government-sponsored. There has also been a resurgence in interest among academics in China. Rigorous experiments by psychologists show that there are striking cognitive differences between Chinese and Americans, with Chinese more likely to use contextual and dialectical approaches to solving problems. Economists take the family as the relevant unit of economic analysis and try to measure the economic effect of such Confucian values as filial piety. Feminist theorists draw parallels between care ethics and the Confucian emphasis on empathy, particularity, and the family as a school of moral education. Theorists of medical ethics discuss the importance of family-based decision-making in medical settings. Those working in the field of business ethics research the influence of Confucian values on business practices in China. Surveys by political scientists show that attachment to Confucian values has increased during the same period that China has modernized. Sociologists study the thousands of experiments in education and social living in China that are inspired by Confucian values.

The renewed academic interest is also driven by normative concerns: an increasing number of critical intellectuals are turning to Confucianism for ways of dealing with China's current social and political predicament. Without entirely rejecting Westernization, they believe that stable and legitimate political arrangements need to be founded, at least partly, on political ideals from their own traditions. Theorists of international relations look to early Confucian thinkers for foreign-policy insights. Legal theorists search for less-adversarial modes of conflict resolution grounded in traditional practices. Philosophers draw upon the ideas of great Confucian thinkers of the past for thinking about social and political reform in China. And Confucian educators work on long-term moral transformation by teaching the Confucian classics to young children.

Of course, such political and academic developments are supported by economic factors. China is a rising economic power, and with eco-

conomic might comes cultural pride. The Weberian view that Confucianism is not conducive to economic development has come to be widely questioned in view of the economic success of East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage. Unlike with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, there has never been an organized Confucian resistance to economic modernization, and such values as respect for education and concern for future generations may have contributed to economic growth. And now, poised to become a global power, it's China's turn to affirm its cultural heritage.

But modernity also has a downside: it often leads to a kind of atomism and psychological anxiety. The competition for social status and material resources becomes fiercer and fiercer, with declining social responsibility and other-regarding outlooks. Communitarian ways of life and civility break down. Even those who make it to the top ask "what now?" Making money, people realize, doesn't necessarily lead to well-being. It is only a means to the good life, but what exactly is the good life—is it just about fighting for one's interests? Most people—in China, at least—do not want to be viewed as individualistic. The idea of simply focusing on individual well-being seems too self-centered. To really feel good about ourselves, we also need to be good to others. Here's where Confucianism comes in: the tradition is based on the assumption that the good life lies in social relationships. To be fully human involves an ethic of social responsibility and political commitment. In China, Confucian ethics is the obvious resource to help fill the moral vacuum that so often accompanies modernization.

In short, this mixture of political, academic, economic, and psychological trends helps to explain the revival of Confucianism in China. These trends are likely to continue, and I would surmise that the revivalism is likely to intensify in the future. But Confucianism is a rich and diverse tradition, and it's worth asking which interpretation of Confucianism ought to be revived.

If the concern is to develop a feasible and desirable political theory for the Chinese context, then it depends on what Chinese people actually think now: any interpretation must be consistent with basic aspirations, though it should also push to improve those aspirations. For example, the interpretation should draw and build on widely shared values like concern for the disadvantaged. The interpretation would

also depend on what Chinese intellectuals regard as pressing needs, such as the need for a new source of ideological legitimacy for the state. Interpretations of Confucianism will also depend upon claims that can be supported by empirical evidence. For example, it would be important to test the idea that caring for elderly parents helps to develop a sense of empathy that is extended to others.

The revival of Confucianism in mainland China is too recent to strongly affirm the superiority of any one interpretation. My own sympathies lie with critical intellectuals like Jiang Qing, who put forward proposals for political change inspired by Confucian values that often differ substantially from the status quo. Such views are discussed in the book, and I've been an active participant in public debates about political Confucianism. I freely confess, however, that it has been an uphill struggle to persuade intellectuals in Western countries that Confucianism can offer a progressive and humane path to social and political reform in China.

Neither Democratic Nor Authoritarian

Why does the revival of Confucianism often worry Westerners? One reason may be a form of self-love. For most of the twentieth century, Chinese liberals and Marxists engaged in a totalizing critique of their own heritage and looked to the West for inspiration. It may have been flattering for Westerners—look, they want to be just like us!—but there is less sympathy now that Chinese are taking pride in their own heritage and turning to their own traditions for thinking about social and political reform. But more understanding and a bit of open-mindedness can take care of that problem.

Another reason might be that the revival of Confucianism is associated with the revival of Islamic “fundamentalism” and its anti-Western tendencies. Perhaps the revival of closed-minded and intolerant Christian “fundamentalism” in the United States also comes to mind. But the revival of Confucianism in China is not so fundamentally opposed to liberal social ways (other than extreme individualist lifestyles, where the good life is sought mainly outside of social relationships). What it does propose is an alternative to Western political ways, and that may

be the main worry. But I think this worry stems from an honest mistake: the assumption that less support for Western-style democracy means increased support for authoritarianism. In China, packaging the debate in terms of “democracy” versus “authoritarianism” crowds out possibilities that appeal to Confucian political reformers.

Confucian reformers generally favor more freedom of speech in China. What they question is democracy in the sense of Western-style competitive elections as the mechanism for choosing the country’s most powerful rulers. One clear problem with “one person, one vote” is that equality ends at the boundaries of the political community: those outside the community are neglected. The national focus of the democratically elected political leaders is part of the system, so to speak: they are meant to serve the community of voters, not foreigners living outside the political community. Even democracies that work well tend to focus on the interests of citizens and neglect the interests of foreigners. But political leaders, especially leaders of big countries like China, make decisions that affect the rest of the world (consider global warming), and they need to consider the interests of the rest of the world when they make decisions.

Hence, reformist Confucians put forward political models that are meant to work better than Western-style democracy in terms of securing the interests of all those affected by the policies of the government. The ideal is not necessarily a world where everybody treats each other as an equal—Confucians realize that care diminishes in intensity as it extends from intimates to strangers—but one where the interests of nonvoters would be taken more seriously than in most nation-centered democracies. And the key value for realizing global political ideals is meritocracy, meaning equality of opportunity in education and government, with positions of leadership being distributed to the most virtuous and qualified members of the community. The idea here is that everybody has the potential to become morally exemplary, but in real life the capacity to make competent and morally justifiable political judgments varies between people and an important task of the political system is to identify those with above-average capacity. One idea might be to give extra votes to elderly people: Confucians assume that wisdom normally increases with age as people’s life experience deepens; when adult children care for elderly parents, for example, they cultivate such

virtues as empathy and humility. Moreover, the elderly are usually less subject to the sexual passions that often get in the way of sound judgment. So if the elderly continue to strive for self-improvement and maintain social networks, perhaps they should be given extra shares of political power.

Another proposal is for a meritocratic house of government, with deputies selected by such mechanisms as free and fair competitive examinations, that would have the task of securing the interests of nonvoters typically neglected by democratically selected political decision-makers such as foreigners, future generations, ancestors, and minority groups (note the difference with legal institutions like the U.S. Supreme Court, which theoretically do not have the power to legislate and do not have a mandate to protect the interests of noncitizens outside the national territory). A meritocratic house of government would balance and complement a democratic house, and, however imperfect, the idea is to better approximate the ideal of government that secures the interests of all those affected by its policies. The value of political meritocracy is deeply embedded in East Asian political discourse, and political proposals to realize it are not typically seen as eccentric or dangerous.

One obvious objection to examinations is that they cannot test for the kinds of virtues that concerned Confucius—flexibility, humility, compassion, and public-spiritedness—and that, ideally, would also characterize political decision-makers in the modern world. It is true that examinations won't test perfectly for those virtues, but the question is whether deputies chosen by such examinations are more likely to be virtuous than those chosen by democratic elections.

There are reasons to believe so. Drawing on extensive empirical research, Bryan Caplan's book *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton University Press, 2008) shows that voters are often irrational, and he suggests tests of voter competence as a remedy. Such proposals have a zero chance of being considered seriously in the United States, where the constitutional system is fixed in its basic outlines and anti-intellectualism runs deep in the political culture. In China, however, the political future is more wide open, and tests of competence in the form of examinations can be considered as proposals for political reform. The examinations would test

for basic economic literacy (and knowledge of international relations), but they would also cover knowledge of the Confucian classics, testing for memorization as well as interpretation. There is an assumption that learning the classics does indeed improve the virtue of the learner. But that's not the end of the story. The leading Confucian political thinker, Jiang Qing, argues that the examinations could set a framework and moral vocabulary for subsequent political actions, and successful candidates would also need to be evaluated in terms of how they perform in practice.

In any case, there is no reason to be dogmatic about different ways of realizing meritocracy before proposals are actually implemented. China is a huge and diverse country, and it is a good laboratory to try out different experiments in political reform. Since Deng Xiaoping opened the doors to economic reform over thirty years ago, various economic experiments have been carried out at different levels of government, with the central government taking what works and implementing the reforms in the whole country. Experiments in village-level democracy have been underway for a couple of decades, and more recently there has been talk of intraparty democracy as well as democratic experiments in cities like Shenzhen and Guiyang. Why not also try out some institutional experiments in meritocracy and see what works? Once we have a better idea of what works at lower levels of government, it might not be so risky to try something at the national level.

The debate over whether Confucianism should be institutionalized as a state religion has generated even more controversy in China. Some Confucians do not take a strong view regarding religion. Following the example of early Confucian thinkers, including Confucius himself, they leave open metaphysical commitments, focusing their efforts on the problems of earthly life. Hence, it's not inconceivable to be a Confucian in social and political life and, say, a Buddhist or Christian in one's spiritual life. Early Confucianism was not meant to provide a final answer to existential questions about human suffering and life after death, and it leaves open the idea that religions may do a better job in that respect.

But other Confucian reformers like Jiang Qing do take Confucianism seriously as a religion with a metaphysical foundation, and draw the implication that there should be official state sponsorship of Confu-

cianism as a kind of religion. The idea is that Confucianism needs to be taught in schools and promoted in villages and communities with some sort of financial support from the state. Partly, the idea is to train future rulers in Confucian ethics so that they will rule with moral sensitivity. As Jiang Qing puts it, we need to be careful about the state (mis)using Confucianism, but Confucianism can also use the state: if future rulers are trained in the Confucian classics, they will likely rule with more moral sensitivity. But he emphasizes that other religions would be tolerated, and compares his ideal to the Danish or UK systems, in which there is state support for an official religion but other religions and sects (whether foreign or not) are permitted and able to flourish. And he explicitly makes room for the political representation of other Chinese religions like Buddhism and Daoism in his proposed House of Historical Continuity.

Still, the idea of state support for Confucianism does seem to go well beyond the North European model, especially in terms of state backing for Confucianism in education and community life. Jiang Qing has also proposed the reintroduction of state-supported Confucian burial rituals following natural disasters such as the Sichuan earthquake (though he allows for the possibility that members of minority groups could follow their own burial rituals). Another way in which “official Confucianism” would influence policy is that civil servants would be able to take paid leave for a limited period of mourning in the event of the death of a parent, similar to the two-month period of mourning leave granted to civil servants in South Korea. To a certain extent, Confucian values already influence state policy (for example, elderly parents are entitled to a share of property if an adult child dies intestate in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, notwithstanding different political and legal systems), and making Confucianism official would make such policies matters of public debate and perhaps lead to improvements. If such proposals for “official Confucianism” are implemented in ways that show tolerance and respect for other religious practices, they are worth taking seriously. The history of “official Confucianism” in Imperial China does offer reason to be wary of state misuses of Confucianism, but it also offers some inspiring moments. In the late sixteenth century, as Yu Ying-shih notes, Matteo Ricci was amazed to discover that the Chinese religious atmosphere was highly

tolerant, with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism all seen as capturing a vision of the same Dao (“Way”).

Popularizing Confucianism

I make no claim to being a neutral observer of Confucianism. Over the past couple of years, I’ve been writing on Chinese society and politics for the popular media, focusing mainly on Confucian values and practices that I consider to be morally defensible and politically promising in the Chinese context (for my op-eds and essays, see my website, which may be accessed through <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9173.html>). In China, I’ve been fortunate to work with an excellent and efficient translator, Professor Wu Wanwei of Wuhan University, who translates and distributes my articles. We work closely together and adopt the following strategy: first, we try the print media, such as the *Global Times*, the international news arm of the official *People’s Daily*. Not surprisingly, I’ve been asked to delete sensitive material, and I’ve often acceded to the demands. Here’s the principle I try to follow: if it’s just a matter of changing the wording to make the criticism more indirect, no problem; if it’s a matter of deleting one or two minor arguments that do not affect the overall point of the article, then I negotiate and compromise, usually accepting some changes; if it’s a matter of changing the main argument or criticism, then I withdraw the article.

Then we submit the articles to Chinese-language Web sites. Without fail, we’ve managed to find at least one Chinese-language Web site that takes our material without changes. I find it strange that the same material that is deemed too sensitive for newspapers can appear on Web sites for public debate. On the one hand, it shows that the Internet has played an important role in expanding the range of political debate in China. On the other hand, it shows that the print media still has some sort of sacred value in China. It could be that the printed page implies some sort of official government approval and thus is more likely to be influential.

In the West, to (over)simplify, the problem is the opposite: it’s much easier to publish an op-ed harshly critical of the Chinese government than one that strives for balance or proposes unfamiliar political alter-

natives. And the chance of a major Western newspaper publishing an op-ed that commends the Chinese government for work well done is even slimmer. Still, I've had quite good luck over the past couple of years. I've been asked to contribute articles and op-eds on the revival of Confucianism, and that usually goes according to plan. Other times, I'll try different op-ed pieces with occasional success and frequent rejections. One rarely knows why Western newspapers turn down op-eds (unless the writer has a special relationship with the editor), but I suspect it's often because my contributions are viewed as too "pro-China." Unlike their Chinese counterparts, the editors of Western newspapers will rarely cite political reasons to reject a piece (with one exception, in my case: the Asian edition of the *Wall Street Journal* refused to publish an op-ed because they oppose the legalization of sex work as a matter of policy).

I confess I did not have much luck writing for conservative publications, though I did try on several occasions. My hunch is that they seem averse to less-than-hostile political commentary about China. I did have more luck writing for centrist publications (or left of center, depending on one's perspective) like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. But most of my writings were published on the Web sites of openly leftist publications. Even then, however, I've had troubles. A leading British leftist newspaper turned down an op-ed that was critical of imperial attitudes toward China. The Chinese translation was subsequently accepted by the *Global Times*, and I can say I was glad for the options opened by the Chinese press. Another time, I had complained to the editor of a Western newspaper that their headlines made me seem like an apologist for the Chinese government, and asked to be consulted about headlines in the future (Chinese newspapers seem more open to consulting authors in this respect). Shortly thereafter, the editor chose another misleading headline and sub-headline, and in a moment of pique I complained in a comment attached to my own article. The editor deleted my comment (though comment is supposed to be free), threatened me with a defamation lawsuit, and said he would cut off my relationship with his paper if I ever did it again. I swallowed my pride and tried to smooth over the relationship, but still feel uneasy about it.

I do not mean to imply that there is equivalence between the Western and the Chinese press, that it's just a matter of different constraints with the same result. In the case of China, the constraints are clearly political and more uniformly applied (academic publications tend to be more open than the popular media: the rule seems to be, the greater the social influence, the greater the constraints). It is almost impossible to openly criticize rulers by name or to suggest concrete institutional alternatives to the status quo at the national level. Nor is it possible to openly say what almost everyone knows to be true: that Marxist-Leninism is basically dead as a ruling philosophy. In the West, there are more media outlets of different political orientations and the constraints are not so straightforwardly set according to the parameters of the ruling party. Obviously I hope the Chinese press loosens up and becomes more like the Western press in that respect (or like the press in Hong Kong, which is basically free and vibrant). So do many public-spirited Chinese journalists: they are often frustrated that they can't report what they investigate, and they feed the information to Western journalists without taking any credit. But—and here's where I will lose the sympathy of most Western journalists—I still think there is room for a distinctive Confucian-inspired approach to the media. When the television news during the 2008 Paralympics opened with a shot of President Hu Jintao singing along with disabled children, I didn't view that as a problem. Quite the contrary—I was watching it with an elderly Chinese relative, who was clearly moved by what she saw. Such news segments have the effect of increasing sympathy for the disabled. Yes, it may also increase sympathy for Hu Jintao, but perhaps we should sympathize with the politicians who are actually doing something good.

What kind of model do I have in mind? The free-market media model is far from ideal because it often translates into the domination of corporate interests and titillating news that diverts attention away from real social problems (a journalist friend from abroad told me that her stories on the Paralympics were often shot down by her editor on the ground that they wouldn't sell papers). The UK model, where regulatory agencies urge balance, might offer more informed and diverse perspectives. But a culturally sensitive approach to media regulation in China, arguably, would also draw upon the Confucian tradition of

moral education. Yes, there can and should be more independent and critical media that tells the truth about social problems and blames the government when it's at fault. But that doesn't rule out government support for media outlets that have the mandate to strive not for the party's interests but for widely endorsed social values like concern for the poor. Such media might involve the portrayal of moral exemplars, appeal to people's better nature, and help to generate sympathy for the disadvantaged. This model need not—and should not—be authoritarian because it would also allow for private media to operate without constraints (other than depictions of extreme violence and pornography). More concretely, it might mean an independent regulatory agency that funds public media according to its success at promoting the goals of diversity, high-quality programming, and moral education. The latter value would make the Chinese model unique—and may strike Westerners who prioritize the value of individual autonomy as moralizing and potentially unfair—but there are areas of justifiable difference that need to be tolerated, if not respected.

Beyond China?

What about the possibility that Confucianism can actually enrich political values and practices in Western countries? Different political theories should allow for the possibility of mutual enrichment. In its best moments, Confucianism has shown openness to other traditions like Legalism, Buddhism, and Daoism, to the point that it's often hard to separate the theories in practice. In its encounter with Western political theories, however, Confucianism has been the student rather than the teacher, and it's worth asking under what conditions Confucianism might be seen as compelling by Western liberals. One condition is that Western societies undergo prolonged crises of confidence. It is a sad truth, perhaps, that people are more inclined to learn from others when their own ways prove to be problematic. Chinese intellectuals looked to the West when traditional ways of social and political life broke down, and it may take a similar crisis of confidence in the West before large numbers of Western intellectuals turn to Confucianism for hope and inspiration (at a conference on the "China model"

that took place shortly after the global financial crisis, an influential Western journalist joked, “Give us time, we’ve only had a few months of humiliation”).

But the key obstacle to universalizing Confucianism, perhaps, is the gap between theory and practice. If it’s just talk, nobody will listen. At the moment, there is a long way to go. The Chinese media tends to serve the party rather than the disadvantaged. The state resorts to thugish tactics against some social critics. Social welfare reformers look more to Europe than to Japan and South Korea. There has hardly been any reform of political institutions inspired by lower-level reforms. The elderly do not get even one vote for choosing top decision-makers, never mind extra votes. A meritocratically selected political institution designed to represent the interests of future generations and foreigners exists only in the dreams of Confucian reformers. There are obvious constraints on religious freedom in China, and the state gives more funds to the promotion of Marxism than to the study of the Confucian classics and the revival of Confucian rituals. In short, progressive and humane Confucian values need to be translated into practice. Once the Chinese government acts morally, in accordance with Confucian ideals, then it can articulate and promote its soft power to the rest of world.

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