

Confucianism on the Comeback: Current Trends in Culture, Values, Politics, and Economy

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There is ample evidence that Confucianism is undergoing a multi-faceted revival in contemporary China. We see this in government slogans, in a runaway best seller on the *Analects* (the compendium of Confucius's teachings), in educational experiments, and in academic activities.

The twentieth century was a bad century for Confucianism. In 1905, a last-ditch effort to reform a floundering empire led to the abandonment of the ubiquitous civil-service exam system, around which higher education in China had been based for centuries. This was followed, in 1911, with the collapse of the last dynasty itself. In 1915, Chinese intellectuals inaugurated a "New Culture Movement" that sought fundamental changes to Chinese values, practices, and even the Chinese language. In many ways, this movement was a more pervasive "cultural revolution" than the later Maoist movement of that name. The values of "modern civilization" were on the rise and older traditions like Confucianism were roundly criticized. Confucianism did not die, but after the first decades of the twentieth century, it would need to find new ways to be relevant in Chinese society.

After this unpromising start, the twentieth century continued to pose obstacles to any rebirth of Confucianism. Some political leaders tried to portray it as a shallow ideology of loyalty to power, while others tried to wipe it completely from the hearts of China's citizens (most notably during the 1973-74 "Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" campaign).

There were some exceptions: philosophers and educators like Liang Shuming (1893-1988) and Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) developed Confucian ideas for the new century and sought to teach its ideals both within the People's Republic (to the limited degree that was possible) and in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even further afield. The "New Confucianism" championed by Mou and others is a fascinating philosophical movement with which current scholars are much engaged. But for the most part, these lonely voices were all that could be heard about Confucianism.

Gradual change started on the mainland in the 1980s, initially in very circumscribed ways. Rather than trace each step over the following two decades, let us now shift to an overview of the ways in which a revival of Confucianism can be observed in Chinese society today. It is helpful to analyze contemporary Confucianism using the following dimensions:

- Confucian Capitalism
- Scholarly Confucianism
- Marxist Confucianism
- Confucian Soft Power

- Tourist Confucianism
- Revivalist Confucianism
- Family Values Confucianism
- Feel-Good Confucianism
- Global Philosophy and Confucianism

Many of these are inter-related or even overlapping, but there is a different story to tell about each.

Talk of *Confucian capitalism* has focused on the idea of the "Confucian entrepreneur." Media across greater China have highlighted the stories of successful businesspeople who have shown exemplary devotion to their families, employees, and communities, and often invoked Confucian language to explain their behavior. Especially when combined with new scholarship showing that in imperial Chinese society there were often very constructive relations between merchants and Confucianism, this effort to articulate a Confucian mode of capitalism—putting more emphasis on social responsibility and harmony, rather than cut-throat competition—seems likely to continue to grow.

There has been a tremendous growth in *scholarly Confucianism* in recent years. Conferences, books, journals, and teaching positions have all proliferated rapidly throughout Greater China. Events bringing together scholars from

the mainland and Taiwan are now commonplace. There have been impressive achievements in historical research and in the editing and republication of texts. Some commentators have noted a lack of philosophical creativity within all of this activity, however, which may be related to the insularity with which students of distinct philosophical traditions often pursue their research.

Marxist Confucianism is surely an oxymoron. And yet, as Chinese leaders have become less doctrinaire in their Marxism, they have shown an increasing penchant for Confucian-sounding rhetoric. Even while he was advocating the “rule of law,” Jiang Zemin was fond of talking about the need to balance this with “rule by virtue.” The idea that rulers must be virtuous is one of the most central Confucian teachings. Over the centuries, Confucians debated whether people or institutions mattered more, with almost all coming down on the side of people: without good individuals to run the institutions, what good would the institutions do?

As for Hu Jintao’s current slogan, “Harmonious Society,” this opens up interesting opportunities for discussion. As some Chinese intellectuals and even media organs have noted, the Confucian notion of harmony is not about unthinking acquiescence to power. Confucius’s *Analects* famously states, “The gentleman is harmonious rather than conformist”; the petty man is the opposite (*Analects* 13:23). The virtuous person’s role is actually to “speak truth to power”—albeit politely. The dialogue between Marxism and Confucianism, in short, may be vexed or it may be productive; it may be superficial or it may lead to new ideas and growth.

A related area is *Confucian soft power*. Confucian symbols are increasingly present in the ways that China presents itself to the world. In just a few years, more than 300 Confucius Institutes have opened around the world. Of course, there is nothing terribly “Confucian” about the institutes, which are primarily devoted to Chinese-language instruc-

tion. Germany named its similar offices “Goethe Institutes”: Goethe’s fame is what mattered, not his specific values. Perhaps more striking is the role that Confucianism played (and Marxism did not play) in the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremonies. This remarkable spectacle began with 2008 drummers chanting the opening lines of the *Analects* as they beat their ancient-style drums. Confucianism was mentioned explicitly several times; the Chinese character for “harmony” was also highlighted. There is no question that China’s public diplomacy has increas-

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ingly drawn on Confucianism’s stress on peace, harmony, mutual flourishing, and education to reconstruct China’s international image. If we think of the tribulations of the Olympic torch relay, though, we will be reminded that symbols and ceremonies are susceptible to multiple interpretations. Peaceful harmony, or suppression of alternative political and spiritual aspirations?

Public diplomacy is about how a nation is understood by outsiders. What of Confucian symbols within China’s borders? *Tourist Confucianism* refers to one part of the answer, namely, the ways in which Confucian sites have been spruced up for domestic consumption. Major sites and symbols are clearly

big business; the China Confucius Association has even tried to standardize (and collect royalties on) the Master’s image. The result has been a major revitalization of these ancient sites, often in ways that reveal the mixed motives lying behind historic preservation.

To understand *revivalist Confucianism*, we need to return briefly to the turn of the twentieth century, and the question that has been asked ever since: is Confucianism a religion? This question had not been asked earlier because prior to the late nineteenth century, there were no terms in Chinese corresponding to “religion” or “philosophy.” One talked of the Confucian “way,” “teaching,” “learning,” “school,” and so on; in each case, these capture aspects of both philosophy and religion. In the early years of the twentieth century, two trends emerged. One was an effort to have Confucianism declared the national religion; the other was to celebrate the (alleged) fact that Confucianism was a secular tradition: it was argued that since it was not dominated by “religion,” China’s culture was well prepared for modernity. The latter trend was far more in tune with the spirit of the times. Academics pursued histories of “Chinese philosophy” while the category of religion—along with the ritual practice that had been centrally associated with Confucianism—was ignored.

Fast-forward to the present day. It now seems obvious to many that Confucianism was more than, or different from, academic philosophy. One leader of this movement, Jiang Qing, has gone so far as to leave his academic post and, with money raised from sympathetic business people in China and Hong Kong, begin a traditional-style Academy in rural southern China. Education there focuses not just on Confucian texts but also on what Jiang and others consider to be a Confucian lifestyle. Jiang has also argued vigorously in various books for a revival of suitably renovated Confucian institutions and for Confucianism to be declared the national religion.

In the eyes of the vast majority of today's Chinese, Jiang's vision is quixotic at best. In many smaller ways, though, what we can call *family values Confucianism* does have some traction. Small private schools with an emphasis on some traditional educational techniques (like memorizing and chanting the Classics) have started to appear, as have similar enrichment activities for students in more conventional schools. Reports appear in the Chinese media of sporadic revivals of ancient ceremonies like a traditional coming-of-age ritual. There are even some institutions that seek to teach such "Confucian" values and practices to whole communities, like the Lujiang Cultural Education Center in rural Anhui province. It is not clear whether these institutions can grow to a scale that would have a sustained impact on Chinese society.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of Confucianism's revival, labeled

here as *feel-good Confucianism*, is the phenomenal success of Yu Dan's book *Insights from the Analects*. (Recently published in English by Macmillan as: *Confucius from the Heart: Ancient Wisdom for Today's World*.) Published in 2006 on the basis of a weeklong series of lectures she gave on a popular television show, the book has now topped ten million copies sold. Professor Yu has an MA in traditional Chinese literature but her PhD is in Media Studies, and it seems likely that her savvy and connections within the publishing industry partly explain the book's wild popularity. But only partly. Yu is a charming person who says her goal is not Confucian scholarship. She writes, "I'm trying to link China's traditional past with its international future," adding, "I don't think that all of [Confucius's] ideas are still relevant." Her book uses folksy stories and accessible examples to express what Confucius means to her. She stresses

the importance of one's inner attitude: gentle but strong, harmonizing differences, and embracing ideals. All this, Yu argues, gives one inner strength.

As an astute observer noted, Yu has essentially depoliticized the *Analects*. Whenever the logic of her interpretation—or the text itself—takes her in the direction of political criticism, she changes the subject or ends the chapter.¹ Chinese scholars have had mixed reactions to the success of Yu's book. Some criticize her for scholarly errors, while others have been more willing to take the book at face value. One leading scholar commented wryly, "At least now more people know there was a book called the *Analects*." Indeed, it is striking how little Yu assumes her audience will know of the text. All passages from the original (which was written in classical Chinese, the language rejected by New Culture activists a century ago) are glossed in modern Chinese, and the

TEACHING ACTIVITY

The *Analects* is rich in pithy statements that challenge unexamined thinking. Confucius is "The Master," teaching his students how to live and thrive in their society. The ideas of his students are sometimes recorded (see [1:4] below), but usually we hear only Confucius, or perhaps his responses to questions from students.

Teachers can use one or more of the statements below to stimulate thought and discussion by (1) asking students to re-phrase the statement; (2) relate the statements to their own lives; or (3) discuss whether or not it is an accurate insight into human behavior.

With older or more advanced students, teachers might assign one or more books of the *Analects* for homework—Books 1 and 4 are particularly appropriate—and ask students to write down their reactions to several passages of their choice in a journal.

[13:23] The Master said: "The superior person is harmonious but not conformist. The petty person is conformist but not harmonious."

[1:1] The Master said: "... If others do not recognize your worth, but you are not resentful, is that not being a superior person?"

[1:4] Zengzi said, "I daily examine myself in three ways. In what I have undertaken on another's behalf, have I failed to do my best? In associating with friends, have I been unfaithful? What has been taught to me, have I not put into practice?"

[4:12] The Master said, "Those who act with a view to their own personal advantage will arouse much resentment."

[4:17] The Master said, "When he sees a worthy man, let him think how he measures up to him; when he sees an unworthy man, let him examine within himself."

[7:22] The Master said, "When I am walking in a group of three people, there will surely be a teacher for me among them. I pick out the good parts and follow them; the bad parts, and change them."

[Translations based on E. Bruce Brooks & A. Taeko Brooks, trans., *The Original Analects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)]

Note: An easily accessible website with text of *The Analects* can be found at www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/index.htm

book contains a complete copy of the *Analects* as an appendix.

Yu Dan's willingness to update Confucius takes us to our final window on the revival of Confucianism: *global philosophy and Confucianism*. Scholars both within China and without are starting to pick up where New Confucians like Mou Zongsan left off: asking about what Confucianism has to contribute to broader contemporary debates concerning ethics, political theory, epistemology, and so on; and also asking what challenges other traditions might have to offer to a contemporary Confucianism.

Do we need more ritual in our lives in the United States? One U.S. scholar has argued so, drawing explicitly on Confucian ideas to make his case. On the other hand, does Confucianism need to revise itself in light of feminist, pluralist, and proceduralist concerns that had historically been ignored? Chinese and international scholars have begun to make these arguments. It is premature to judge whether Confucianism will become a major partner in global philosophical dialogues, but there is some reason to be hopeful.

Confucianism is on the comeback: that much is clear. But what is driving the multifaceted revival that we have been tracking? By way of conclusion, let us consider six different reasons:

The first two are straightforward: the desire for stability (on the part of the government and of many citizens) and commercialism. We have seen several ways in which these two motives intersect with Confucianism today.

The third reason is, ironically, the negation of the second: many Chinese feel that they suffer from some level of values crisis. Commercialism or materialism are not enough, and lead to many social problems. Confucianism may or may not offer solutions to this crisis, but some of the widespread interest we have seen is sparked by the

idea that it may provide a richer sense of the meaning of human life.

Fourth, Confucianism is connected to the much-remarked resurgence of Chinese nationalism. What does it mean to be Chinese? Answering this question has led many back to Confucianism—not for the whole answer, but for an essential part of a satisfying answer.

Related to nationalism is a fifth reason, namely searching for a “contribution” that Chinese civilization can make to the world, if its “rise” is to be more than simply economic. A widely watched television miniseries in 2007 argued that each of the “great powers” from world history had made key contributions to human civilization. Is Confucianism part of what China has to offer?

Finally, and building on this last question, a sixth reason for Confucianism's revival may simply be that it has captured insights about the human condition of lasting, cross-tradition value. Even independent from the domestic concerns of Chinese citizens, that is, we may all have reason to look once again—or for the first time—at the teachings of the Master. 🌐

Note

1. See Daniel A. Bell's review of Yu Dan's book, published in Chinese and translated as an Appendix to Bell's *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

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