

4-2019

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Recommended Citation

Shi, Yuanhui (2019) "Contemporary Contexts of Confucianism," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 80 : No. 80 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol80/iss80/7>

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Contemporary Contexts of Confucianism

Yuanhui Shi

Abstract

This paper discusses the possibility that Confucianism will be put into political practice in present-day China. Although New Confucians in mainland China often call for the revival of Confucianism for the cure of many current social problems, there are some unconquerable obstacles, among which political construction is the most crucial. What is more noteworthy is that Confucianism itself has some doctrinal defects provoking those practical obstacles. Therefore, this paper argues that Confucianism, advocating a moral government of benevolence, is a doctrine of idealized political order, but it lacks the practical elements needed for realistic political operation.

Since 2014 some New Confucians in mainland China have been preaching that Confucianism should to be inserted into political practice, and that China be Confucianized, demanding “to return to Kang Youwei”.¹ Now, somewhat differentiated from their previously allied Taiwanese counterparts, from whom they once obtained academic resources and inspirations, New Confucians support the idea of having Confucianism adopted as the official ideology guiding the political life of the entire state. Here lies the difference between the two groups: can Confucianism serve as a political construction for the present China, or merely provide some spiritual and moral guidelines for people in their common lives? A judgment by one New Confucian in mainland China addressed this point. He described the New Taiwan Confucians as “very abominable, shallow, cowardly and therefore futureless”,² evidently because he expected his cousins in Taiwan to have done more than merely emphasizing the spiritual and moral significance of Confucianism.

The Revival of Confucianism in Mainland China

To understand how the political demands of New Confucians in mainland China are pushing China to align with Confucianism instead of Marxist or Western political ideas we will examine past events.

¹ Ge, Zhaoguang, “A Daydream: The Political Claim of New Confucians in Mainland China.” July 6, 2017 <<http://www.aisixiang.com/data/104951.html>>.

² Zeng, Yi, Guo Xiaodong, *What Is Universalism, and Whose Values Is It?—Universalism from the Perspectives of Contemporary Confucianism*. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2013, p. 21.

The First Opium War (1838–1842) awakened China out of a long-cherished illusion of being a self-contained power of political, economical, military and cultural superiority. From then on, many efforts were made to compensate for feelings of inferiority to Western powers. The Self-Strengthening Movement, the Hundred Days' Reform and May Fourth Movements are examples of these efforts. The Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) was mainly focused on setting up factories for the purpose of economic and military benefits. The Hundred Days' Reform (11 June to 22 September 1898, late Qing Dynasty) focused further on politically modernizing China (1861-1895). The May Fourth Movement (1917-1921) challenged traditional Chinese Confucianism in its cultural and ideological validity.

Progressive demands for reformation were motivated by the deep anxiety inflicted by foreign challenges to China's sovereignty during the period of colonization. The Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred Days Reform could be seen as two preparatory stages for the May Fourth Movement. Failures of some of these reform campaigns, along with disappointment with the Xinhai Revolution, ultimately drew more attention to ideological Confucianism and enabled the coming cultural self-analysis and doubt.

Differing from the two previous reformative efforts, the May Fourth Movement was overwhelmingly successful in awakening cultural reformation in China. Subsequently traditional Confucianism was marginalized in spite of strong support from some conservative voices. This led to an acceleration of the course of modernization. Although after 1949 mainland China and Taiwan chose two different political systems, the modernizing course continued in both regions.

It is noteworthy that in Taiwan, mainland Confucianism was not completely rejected. It was still preached by New Confucians, such as Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan. Meanwhile in mainland China, many intellectuals were fiercely criticized for their anti-revolutionary academic ideas, including New Confucians such as Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming and Feng Youlan, and even Marxist academics Hou Wailu and Jian Bozan. This nationwide mass denunciation reached its height when the Cultural Revolution declared Confucianism one of its main targets. The traditional belief of thousands of years was made into an historical outcast.

As economic growth became the focus of national policies in mainland China in 1977, the course of modernization, mainly industrialization and commercialism, gradually picked up speed and led to a period of economic prosperity in the 2010s. But beneath the glittering surface of prosperity lay many disappointments and disillusionments that were widely felt. Among the worst were environmental pollution, school disorder, spiritual degradation and political corruption of all types.

Many New Confucians in mainland China, with inspirations from Taiwanese Confucianism, concluded that the renunciation of Confucianism was the cause of all these social ills, and that to resolve them, China ought to rehabilitate the traditional beliefs for the national ideological stage.

One point we have to admit is that Confucianism mainly speaks to the human mind and aims at uplifting it morally,³ and so in this sense, those New Confucians are sensible in their call for the revival of Confucianism.

Some Obstacles

But there are some obstacles to the political resurrection of Confucianism in mainland China.

First, the crucial pillars for the medieval ideology of Confucianism are lacking. According to thousands of years of history in China, phraternal management⁴, Imperial Examinations and monarchical tyranny combined to put Confucianism into political practice, which respectively organized people inside their clans by means of Confucian ethics, implemented Confucian notions in political life through those officials selected by their mastery of Confucian classics, and ensured that Confucianism would be adopted as the national ideology and preached nationally. But with all of these structural foundations disrupted long ago, how could it be possible for Confucianism to restore its ancient tenets?

Another point is that the above-mentioned social problems in mainland China also came as a result of global industrialization and commercialism, a world-wide epidemic. In medieval times Confucianism in China can be recognized as a tool that was used to foster and shape a healthy human mind among intellectuals and underprivileged people in spite of the prevailing political corruption. But how could Confucianism alone act as an effective buffer for such an overwhelming influence without any assistance from outside, when it was still unknown if this traditional belief system was officially adopted and enforced by the Chinese political system?

³ Liang, Shuming, *Human Mind and Human Life*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011, p. 86.

⁴ This practice (宗族主义) stressed that hierarchical management must be established and respectfully carried on within every kin phratry (usually made up of smaller families with the same male ancestor and thus the same surname) in order to maintain a peaceful and orderly sustenance for all the phraternal members, advantaged or disadvantaged. The phraternal management was originally advocated and implemented by the initial rulers of the Zhou dynasty and later reinforced by Confucius and Mencius in Confucianism, lasting until the end of the Qing dynasty. See Fu, Lecheng, *A History of China*. Guiyang: Guizhou Education Press, 2010, pages 37-38; Li, Zehou, *Historical Ontology & Five Essays from 1999*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008, p. 181; and Liang, Shuming, *The Substance of Chinese Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011, p. 77.

Besides, “ren” (benevolence), the core ideas of Confucianism⁵ focus attention on human morals and ethics. Political balance, economic exploitation, and military mobilization are also areas of focus, but to a lesser extent.

As a founding doctrine for Chinese culture, Confucianism, established by Dong Zhongshu as predominant in political affairs, ascended to its historical level of ideology under the reign of the emperor Wu of Han (141-87 BCE). But in fact, the emperor preferred military generals, cold-hearted administrators, efficient labor foremen, and profit-thirsty financiers more than the Confucians for the simple reason that the former were much more useful to his policies of foreign wars and hierarchical control of the empire.

An example of this is that Sang Hongyang, one of emperor Wu of Han’s most successful economic managers, completely defeated some highly-skilled Confucians in a debate about his exploitive wealth-collecting practices. The Confucians knew little about revenue generation and were only able to repeat the moral ideas of Confucius.

Wang Mang, who was a strong believer in Confucianism when he was enthroned as part of the Han dynasty, planned to carry on a political reformation in line with Confucianism, but he was overthrown and killed by rebels. Here we have to acknowledge that Wang’s reformation failed partly for the reason that Confucianism was not designed to effectively manage practical political, economic and military tasks.

In this sense, the emperor Xuan of Han, known for his political success, once warned his prince that Confucianism and Legalism combined to make an effective government for their Han Dynasty, but that Confucians were too impractical.⁶ The warning was heeded by several emperors who followed Xuan, and this resulted in better control of their empires. This is the reason why so many emperors in ancient China used Legalism skills to keep control of their empires while, for the purpose of cultural gloss, pretended to believe in Confucianism.

Why Is Confucianism Not Good in a Political Context?

Confucianism is actually a doctrine of moral ideas and ethic concerns. Although many ancient Confucians declared that moral growth and political practice were both their life ambitions, they were largely lacking in political skills.

To be a successful politician or statesman, in a larger sense, demands mastery of knowledge and skills of various areas.

⁵ Feng, Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Tianjin: Tianjin Social Sciences Press, 2005, p. 39; Lao, Siguang, *A New History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 1. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005, p. 83-87.

⁶ Ban, Gu, *Book of Han*, Vol. 1. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1964, p. 277.

With this a leader may achieve a healthy power balance, a prosperous economy, a lively and productive culture, and the security of military strength. But the focus of Confucianism is on developing minds morally and ethically. The ideas of economic construction, scientific research, technological uplift, balance of political power, and military strength were occasionally recognized to be the result of moral and ethical cultivation, but usually totally neglected in Confucian thought.

Private commercialism and industry were usually ranked low and sometimes even suppressed in ancient China. According to Confucianism, the people who engaged in business were mostly profit-thirsty and morally dishonest. Also, much more dangerously, it was thought that these profiteers would greatly widen the wealth gap between the rich and the poor, causing an increased risk of famine by attracting more peasants to turn from farming to business, and greatly disrupt the national moral standards by means of their expensive and immoral life.

Another reason, probably more intrinsically urgent to emperors, was that private businesses would grow powerful enough to be a threat to the stability of their empires. In this sense, many emperors, especially those inclined to an absolute hierarchical control of the empire, such as emperor Wu of Han, acted forcefully to establish and strengthen state-owned businesses, and to greatly reduce the power and size of the private economy.

Amazing achievements in science and technology were once made in ancient China. The famous Houmuwu Ding (a massive bronze vessel) was cast during the Shang Dynasty, utilizing the most sophisticated chemical, physical and metallurgical knowledge and skills in the world at the time.⁷ During the reign of the emperor Wu of Han, weapons of the highest quality gave one Han soldier such an advantage that he could be as effective as five Huns on the same battlefield.⁸ But such knowledge and skills were believed to be low and insignificant by Confucians who believed that science and technology were simply more particular, and thus less important, than the development of moral principles throughout society. This was what would make the empire more thoroughly healthy and everlasting than any other idea or practice, according to the Confucians.

The historical fact related to a powerful Western cannon can be used to confirm this point. During the Ming Dynasty, Xu Guangqi recommended use of the cannon, which was finally put to the test on the Manchu battlefield, greatly assisting in the victory over the troops of Nurhaci. But the Ming government still refused to widely use this more effective weapon, probably as a result of bribery of Ming officials by some businessmen to help the profiteers maintain their monopoly of all foreign trade.

⁷ Wu, Xiaobo, *Chinese Enterprises from the 7th Century B. C to the Year 1869*. Beijing: China Critic Press Group, 2017, p. x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.80.

Cannons would lead to profits for the Macau Spaniards who were ready to sell cannons to the Ming leaders.

Some Ming officials, for the purpose of downplaying Xu Guangqi, even intentionally withheld necessary supplies for the troops of Sun Yuanhua, a disciple of Xu. This led the two officers under Sun to yield to the Manchu army, resulting in Sun's beheading by the emperor. What is ironic is that the cannon was widely accepted and used by the Manchu, vastly increasing their military strength, facilitating the victory over the Ming empire, literally helping to establish Qing sovereignty.⁹

Johann Adam Schall von Bell, a Jesuit priest and close friend and counselor to the emperor Shunzhi of Qing, did much to increase scientific knowledge and technology in China. Although he was jailed for a time as a result of political subterfuge, he was an expert in astronomy and even an accomplished engineer who designed a powerful cannon.¹⁰

In the history of China, balance of political power always alternated between establishing and collapsing, with the dynasties coming one after the one, without any establishment of a solid political environment. Without an effective balance of power, emperors often grew to be self-centered, indulgent, and tyrannical, with their favorite eunuchs, relatives or officials getting more and more powerful and thus spreading corruption.

On the other hand, some officials or generals used their influence to be independent from central government, or even to attempt to seize power from an emperor who was perceived to be weak. Out of the fear that their thrones might be endangered or taken over, many emperors were most concerned with their own stability and tight control of military power. At times of war throughout history, many emperors, in order to ensure their control over soldiers, used their eunuchs to counterbalance their generals. Few emperors would hand their troops over to the complete command of their officials or generals with solid belief in that leadership. In this way military strength was greatly diminished in ancient China.

Defects in Confucianism

Confucianism could not achieve a balance of political power because it sought to provide a clear and actionable conception of personal duties and rights to shape trustworthy human relations that was combined with the practical aspect of duties fulfilled and rights secured.

⁹ Zhu, Weizheng, *Out of the Medieval Times*, Exp. edition. Shanghai: Fudan University, 2007, p. 116-118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163-192.

This was not enough to maintain a stable balance of political power. Confucians were mainly concentrated on preaching the merit of “ren” (benevolence) and thus only wished to arouse the moral sense of others and achieve a mutually reliable human relationship by means of constantly uplifting one’s own moral condition to be a moral model for his neighborhood.

The Book of Lord Shang points out that the benevolent (those who have achieved the merit of “ren”) can be benevolent to others, but can’t make others benevolent without fail; that is, being benevolent or even shouldering one’s duties without asking for his rights can’t necessarily arouse the moral sense of others so as to accomplish a moral world.¹¹ Since there was no reasonable and consistent understanding of duties and rights, much less a multilateral one, a permanently trustworthy human relationship couldn’t be established or solidly maintained while mutual disbelief would appear and grow. What’s more, the highlighting of moral merit and the neglect of personal rights combined to bring up many hypocritical saints and to provoke doubt and even repulsion against Confucianism among some practical-minded people, thus making a mutually-trusting human relationship more difficult or even more impossible.

According to Li Zehou, “ren”, is a kind of human psychology of benevolence radiating from the affection between parent and child.¹² He argued that the merit, having originated from the emotional state of awe, piety and gravity in shamans during their praying rituals, was finally conceptualized as “ren” by Confucius.¹³ This idea is no doubt reasonable in that it highlights the significance of family relations, the state of self-examining and self-disciplining, as well as the mindset of moral beneficence.

Therefore, we can arrive at the judgment that although Confucianism is also focused on human benevolence, it is different from the Christian fraternity, for the conception of “ren” has its starting-point established on the affection between parent and child. Mencius stated, “We should extend our affections for our parents and children to those of others”.¹⁴ Here the implication is that although one should love and care about other people, the love for his own family members ought to be greater than that for others.

Just due to this fact, Fei Xiaotong pointed out that the traditional social structure in China was basically the type of “water rippling from a self-center,” in which affectionate concern decreased when further from the center. This is different from the Western idea of each person standing on ground of the same level.¹⁵

¹¹ *The Book of Lord Shang*. Ann. Shi Lei. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2016, p. 165.

¹² Li, Zehou, *Historical Ontology & Five Essays from 1999*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008, p. 181.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁴ Zhu, Xi, *Annotations of the Four Books*. Xi’an: Sanqin Publishing House, 1998, p. 317.

¹⁵ Fei, Xiaotong, *From the Soil*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2013, p. 26.

He further stated that Confucianism advocated an egoism instead of the Western-style of individualism, although this egoism was not that of absolute selfishness, but, rather, of a self-centered human benevolence.¹⁶

That is to say, although Confucianism preached that one should carry on his responsibilities for himself, his family, his country and his world, it still emphasized that all these responsibilities must have oneself serving as a radiating central point. This makes Confucian egoism, a doctrine of human benevolence diminishing from the self-center, different from Western individualism, which especially has stressed equality. This also explains why true human equality didn't appear in ancient China.

Although Confucianism was mainly based on egoism, it was still focused on family relations, especially the parent-child relationship. Family was, for the Chinese people, a spiritual harbor and the most important source of reliable friends. Very few people would leave their families behind and act completely egoistically.

The Chinese people regard their families as their life center and extend the ethical principles of family relations to social life, thus lacking the sense of individualism and public spirit characteristic of Western life, as Liang Shuming argued.¹⁷ In this sense, Confucianism couldn't cultivate truly modern citizens, individuals with substantial mentalities for modern political life.

The stress of moral ethics in Confucianism made principles of morality predominant as ideological guidelines for social life, suppressing some carnal human needs and desires, and then seeking social progress for higher civilizations of prosperity and freedom.

In Confucianism, personal conscience rather than outside instruction was highly depended on for moral uplift, and Confucius once argued that self-disciplining and following moral principles would lead one to achieve "ren", and one should rely on himself instead of others for the achievement of that merit.¹⁸ This means that one had to conduct self-examination and self-discipline to pursue moral progress step by step, and to shoulder his responsibilities for himself, his family, his country, and his world stage by stage. Yet in this lay the contradictory notion that one could either be only concerned with himself and his family, or extend his concern to his country, as well as his world.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁷ Liang, Shuming, *The Substance of Chinese Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011, p. 77.

¹⁸ Zhu, Xi, *Annotations of the Four Books*. Xi'an: Sanqin Publishing House, 1998, p. 149, 199.

The difference was completely determined by his own judgment whether he was successful or not, just as Mencius once said that one should make a contribution to his world when he was successful, and if not he might (as well) be responsible for himself.¹⁹ In this sense, one had to depend on his own conscience to lift up his moral level and shoulder his responsibilities.

Thus, different people were allowed to form specific moral expectations for themselves, and similarly to decide to be responsible either for themselves or for their country and their world.

Naturally, people were completely allowed to be self-centered or universally-spirited, or anywhere between the two opposites. At the same time, each person was fairly self-confident that he had achieved the merit of “ren” or at least come very close.

Taking this point into consideration, we may understand why it was so hard for the Chinese people to come to a completely reasonable agreement, society-wide, without any irritation or even hatred, for each of them believed that he himself was morally right and thus justifiable at the core, therefore unwilling to yield or change his own idea.

During the Song Dynasty, Wang Anshi and Sima Guang, both Confucian saints and patriots, couldn’t arrive at an agreement about how to make their country economically prosperous and militarily strong, and they rejected each other’s political ideas totally whether it was reasonable and helpful or not.

When Wang Anshi was in office, he couldn’t accept Sima Guang’s challenge or criticism of his reformative policies and Sima Guang had to live in Luoyang, far away from the national political center of Bianliang (Kaifeng at present). In return, when Wang was removed and Sima Guang restored to his office, he had all the policies made by Wang abolished, even if some of them proved to be effective in economics and in military construction.

Of course, we can’t deny that, due to the fact that both of them were moral saints, they respected each other in terms of private relationship, mutually trying not to offend or attack the other. However, in the history of China, Confucians could seldom tolerate different political ideas and even were moderately eager to offend and attack their political rivals. This explains why the Chinese people couldn’t accept genuine equality or democracy at the bottom of their hearts. It also explains why, in Confucianism, there was no really effective means for the Chinese people to arrive at an optimal judgment or policy.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.516.

In Chinese culture the so-called term “mianzi,” face, is actually one’s moral self-image established according to his own conscience. Since conscience is personal and self-motivating, “mianzi” has to be shaped by means of moral self-examination, self-discipline and self-improvement. Therefore, when under moral criticism, the Chinese people, believing that their personal conscience has been doubted and challenged, usually respond furiously and fiercely. This means that people should be given adequate respect for themselves to find and redress their moral failures, and at the same time leads to the fact that the Chinese people are not accustomed to rational discussion or debate.

Confucianism, advocating a moral government of benevolence, is a doctrine of an idealized political order, but it is lacking in practical means of bringing such an ideal into reality, as is discussed above in this section.

The Significance of Confucianism in Present-day China

Since entering the stage of national ideology under Emperor Wu of Han, Confucianism set the guidelines for the Chinese people in all aspects of their life for more than 2000 years — up to 1949.

Ancient Chinese literature, essays, poems, dramas and novels all carried various Confucian messages and thus shaped traditional Chinese culture, which in turn forged the typical Chinese consciousness that one should be industrious, morally self-uplifting, and responsible for himself, his family, his country and his world. That is to say, Confucianism always preached a moral, active and responsible life outlook, and helped the nation survive many frustrations and hardships by providing for the Chinese people a psychological anchor and a spiritual beacon.

In fact, Confucianism still preaches that life attitude to the Chinese people and forges the Chinese consciousness through the reading of classic Chinese essays, poems, dramas and novels. In this sense, Confucianism is still effective in today’s China, serving as a spiritual beacon and a psychological anchor for the Chinese people.²⁰

²⁰ Li, Zehou, *Historical Ontology & Five Essays from 1999*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2008, p. 106-125.

But in terms of politics, Confucianism has not been helpful, and will not be helpful at least as a main framework. Mou Zongsan stated that the moral government principles of Confucianism were consistent with the content of democracy,²¹ and he was quite reasonable in that Confucianism was calling continuously for a truly benevolent political policy in that politics must be responsible for the life of the people, for the future of the country and the world, thus inclined to serve the true welfare of the people, the country and the world. This idea is essentially in agreement with Western democratic principles. However, we still have to admit that those Confucian principles were spiritually-based ideals of politics, lacking practical means of realistic operation, which have been and still are nearly impossible to put into real practice.

Of course, Confucianism might be helpful in forming a more comprehensive understanding of justice and goodness and redressing some faults of democratic procedures, for Confucianism is more focused on the effects of justice than on stopping at a just procedure.

Conclusion

Why are New Confucians in mainland China are calling for Confucianism to be ideologized and put into political practice?

This is actually a continuation of the idea of the New Taiwan Confucians, and it is, of course, a natural response from Confucianism to the Western challenge as well as to social problems provoked by commercialism and industrialization, such as environmental pollution, educational disorder, spiritual degradation and political corruption. Many New Confucians in mainland China believe that Confucianism can be an effective answer to these threats, for the doctrine has shaped the hardworking and moral-spirited Chinese consciousness and helped the Chinese people get through many challenges.

But as we have discussed above, there are some obstacles, Confucianism could not overcome if put into political practice, for Confucianism has lost its crucial pillars that existed in ancient China, and what is more noteworthy, has some inherent defects in political construction.

Of course, Confucianism will benefit the Chinese people a great deal by providing them with a more active and hopeful life outlook, as well as serving as a psychological foundation. But in terms of the world of politics, of political construction, Confucianism will not be as effective as the New Confucians of mainland China are expecting.

²¹ Mou, Zongsan, *Political Principles and Governing Principles*. Taipei: Student Book Co., 1983, p. 123.

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