
THE
CHINA
QUESTIONS

CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO
A RISING POWER

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28 | WHO IS CONFUCIUS IN TODAY'S CHINA?

Michael Puett

FOR MUCH of the twentieth century, Confucius was seen as the embodiment of what China had to reject in order to enter the modern world. Confucius was portrayed as the supporter of a traditional social order, in which humans had to be socialized through rituals to accept their given roles and duties. If people would then live out these roles and duties properly, society would become harmonious. Fathers would be proper fathers, sons would be filial sons, wives would be loyal wives. Along with these social roles, the rituals would also inculcate a proper belief in all humans that the cosmos was itself a harmonious system. If humans would follow their social roles properly, then not only would society be harmonious, but it would also be in accord with the larger harmony of the cosmos. The goal for humans was thus simply to accept society and the world as tradition had prescribed. As the purported philosopher behind such ideas, Confucius was the ultimate symbol of a traditional way of thinking.

In opposition to Confucius was a self-perceived modernist vision. According to this view, humans needed to destroy the traditional world altogether and create the world anew. For the first half of the twentieth century, the debate in China, as elsewhere, revolved around which modernist vision should be embraced: capitalism, socialism, or communism. In 1949, one of these modernist-isms, communism, won.

Mao Zedong called upon the population to rise up and forge a new, egalitarian society. And a key part of this was a full rejection of Confucius. The extreme point of such a rejection was reached during the Cultural Revolution, when texts and artifacts associated with Confucius were destroyed as part of a campaign to wipe out the past and create a new communist reality. Mao's claim was that, twenty years after the revolution, the officials of the Communist Party were becoming like a new scholarly class that would be in danger of reverting to traditional ways of thinking. Mao's call in the Cultural Revolution was for the people to rise up against the Party officials, just as they had (according to his reading of history) risen up against the Party officials of the last dynasty. Mao explicitly labeled his opponents—figures like Lin Biao—as Confucians who therefore needed to be destroyed.

But modernist rejections of a perceived traditional world are nothing new. In fact, during the Cultural Revolution, Mao explicitly compared himself to the First Emperor—the figure who, in 221 BCE, after unifying the competing states, tried to destroy the traditional world of the previous Three Dynasties. And the First Emperor also tried to destroy those intellectuals who wanted to model society on the past. The Confucians—then as well—were held in particular contempt. According to one source, the First Emperor had the Confucians buried alive. Mao argued that the only difference between himself and the First Emperor was that he, Mao, would be more ruthless, fully eradicating the ideas that the First Emperor correctly tried but ultimately failed to destroy.

If the First Emperor's modernist revolution failed, Mao's ultimately did as well. Mao's communist vision came to be discredited and was later replaced with a strong turn toward capitalism. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, China had become one of the most extreme *laissez faire* capitalist systems in the world. But the rhe-

toric of breaking from a traditional, Confucian society and entering the modern world continued—only now the modern world was defined as capitalism rather than communism.

The result of China's turn to an extreme form of neoliberal capitalism was an extraordinary period of economic growth. But the result was also a society increasingly polarized by radical income inequality. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, a self-conscious debate arose in China about whether China had lost its values, about whether it had become a world where everything was simply about wealth and power.

Out of this debate, Confucius returned.

The beginnings of the rethinking of Confucius began not in China itself but a couple of decades earlier, in another part of Asia. In the 1980s, Singapore began developing a form of state capitalism—one in which a market economy would be supported but also overseen by a bureaucracy of highly educated officials. The officials were not democratically elected but, rather, chosen through a form of meritocracy. Tellingly, the government explicitly claimed that such a meritocracy—in which the officials would be in charge of public infrastructure and the legal system, as well as moral governance of the populace—was based on Confucian values. Such a Confucian vision was also presented as being an antidote to the individualistic, amoral form of modernity being practiced in the West.

Instead of the tradition vs. modernity framework that had been so dominant for the previous decade, in which Confucius figured as the icon of the traditional world that had to be destroyed, Singapore was instead emphasizing a cultural divide between the West and East, and Confucius was now the icon of the East that needed to be extolled.

Increasingly, this became the framework embraced by the People's Republic of China as well. Over the past several years, China has

been strengthening the meritocratic criteria for admission into the government and has been strongly emphasizing the importance of major state investment in public infrastructure, education, and green technology. Moreover, such an approach has increasingly been contrasted with the views dominant in the West. Unlike the form of neoliberalism that had become predominant for the past several decades, with a focus on limited government and privatization, China presents itself as a society with an extremely successful capitalist system, yet one which is re-developing forms of governance that it, following Singapore, associates with Confucius. Part of China's claim for world leadership thus increasingly rests on the argument that China, with its Confucian form of governance, will be able to tackle issues like economic inequality and climate change—issues that the United States, with its governance structures so controlled by lobbying interests, cannot address.

If Confucius was the figure Mao saw as most antagonistic to his dreams of a communist utopia, the new regime in China presents Confucius as precisely the figure offering an alternative to Western neoliberalism. Related to such claims has been an international outreach aimed at educating the world about what had once been disparaged as traditional Chinese culture. A series of government-sponsored, well-funded centers, called Confucius Institutes, are being built around the world to support the study of the Chinese language and Chinese culture. The traditions that were once being destroyed are now being presented as embodying a vision that offers a new possibility for twenty-first-century humanity. If Confucius previously represented the traditional worldview that held humans back, Confucius is now being presented as an alternative to the alienation, individualism, and anthropocentrism of Western modernity in general, and more specifically to the dysfunctional forms for governance seen in Western societies.

But where in the traditions are such readings of Confucius being found? The view of Confucius as a traditional thinker, forcing people to follow their roles submissively, was based upon a narrow reading of late imperial Chinese history. The new reading, on the contrary, takes much of its inspiration from the Han dynasty—the dynasty that came to power after the short-lived Qin dynasty of the First Emperor collapsed—as well as the later Tang dynasty. After the fall of the Qin dynasty of the First Emperor, the ensuing Han dynasty continued many of the First Emperor's innovations, but it also brought back the idea of building upon the traditions of the past. The Confucians, instead of being persecuted, were brought to court and eventually became a new class of officials staffing the imperial bureaucracy. They supported the creation of a meritocracy, in which the state would be run by an educated elite charged with building public infrastructure and running the legal system.

So is the current situation in China comparable to the early Han dynasty, with the regime building upon the innovations of Mao while creating a powerful state through the formation of a meritocracy? And will the next several centuries of Chinese history involve, as it did with the Han and later Tang, the emergence of China as one of the most successful states in the world?

These are among the major debates in China. Should the current moment be thought of in terms of tradition vs. modernity, East vs. West frameworks, some combination of these, or something else altogether? And is Confucius the salvation or the figure whose ideas must be destroyed?

This debate is playing out in many ways. Films about the Qin, Han, Tang, and late imperial periods have become common recently, as implicit ways to debate the current period and its relationship to earlier Chinese history. And films and books about Confucius have begun to proliferate as well—not the Confucius associated with the

late imperial period, or even the Confucius associated with the Han and Tang periods, but the Confucius as portrayed in the *Analects*, the book of Confucius's teachings as recorded by his various disciples. Here, too, opposing visions have emerged—Confucius as a great sage who created a new moral vision (as in a highly popular book by Yu Dan), or Confucius as a human striving to be a good teacher (as in a competing book by Li Ling).

After a century of rejecting its traditions, we are witnessing an exciting moment in Chinese history, when the past is actively being debated, re-interpreted, and appropriated anew. How this will play out is impossible to say, but it is a debate that is worth following very closely. Which Confucius will emerge out of these debates, and how the current moment will be understood vis-à-vis earlier history, will have major ramifications for the type of society China will become and the way it will position itself in relation to the rest of the world.