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Following the Great Dao of international relations: A Confucian prescription for peace

Abstract

Extract:

Peace is our common goal. People with conscience work toward its achievement and it is, of course, a duty for all religious people. Confucianism is a humanitarian philosophy. Hence, the ultimate concern of Confucianism is happiness for all people in the present human world. Confucian disciples seek to implement in this world the Great Dao (Way) and thereby transform it into the Great Harmony or datong. In this datong, the world belongs to all. This is what Confucius taught.

Keywords

Confucius, Great Dao, conscience, harmony

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VIEWPOINT:

Following the Great *Dao* of International Relations - A Confucian Prescription for Peace

by Tong Yun Kai(1)

Peace is our common goal. People with conscience work toward its achievement and it is, of course, a duty for all religious people. Confucianism is a humanitarian philosophy. Hence, the ultimate concern of Confucianism is happiness for all people in the present human world. Confucian disciples seek to implement in this world the Great *Dao* (Way) and thereby transform it into the Great Harmony or *datong*. In this *datong*, the world belongs to all. This is what Confucius taught.

The world is no one's private property.

The implementation of such a notion is not beyond our human capacity. Its building blocks are available to us all in our qualities as human beings. Righteousness, fidelity and forgiveness are qualities to be nurtured and promoted, much as individualism and consumerism are the qualities rewarded in the ruling ethos of today's global society.

Righteousness is the principle for weighing up gains and losses and distinguishing between right and wrong. Therefore, the criteria for electing officials are talent, virtue and ability. The principle for dealing with interpersonal and international relations is to practise fidelity. In such a *datong*, there is no selfish scheming: "Bandits and thieves, rebels and trouble-makers do not show themselves" and "the outer doors of houses never have to be closed".(2)

Confucius teaches us to bind together all the steps to the Great *Dao* - studying closely the essence of things, acquiring knowledge, making one's will sincere, rectifying one's mind, cultivating oneself, harmonising one's family, governing one's state well, and finally, bringing peace to the world.(3) Hence, the attitude that there should be no scheming of "bandits and thieves, rebels and trouble-makers" for dealing with interpersonal relations can be extended to dealing with international relations. There being no need for closing the outer doors for all households can be extended to there being no need for any armaments or national defence. If such a world is built in earth, this present human world will already be one of peace and security.

How can the global *datong* be built? It is an embodiment of the Great *Dao*. When the Great *Dao* prevails, the world is at *datong*. "The way of the Master is fidelity and forgiveness."(4) The spirit of Confucianism can be characterised as "fidelity and forgiveness". Fidelity is being sincere, rectifying one's mind, trying one's best, being reverent. According to Confucius, in the *Analects*, the *junzi* (morally cultivated person) is reverent and does nothing amiss, is respectful towards others and observant of the rites (rules of proper conduct), and "all within the Four Seas" are like family to such a person.(5) Fidelity personalised and universalised leads to a *datong* of mutual assistance - a cooperative rather than competitive international order.

Forgiveness is: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire."(6) To infer that which others like and dislike by reflecting on our own likes and dislikes, to make it part of our behaviour, and to practice it in the reality of each other's lives is a realisation of a special state of global (*datong*) consciousness. It is when "people love not only their own parents; they treat with parental care not only their own children".(7) When we love others' relations and children because we love our own relations and children and hope they will be respected and well-treated, it is a behaviour of extending our love to others. By further extension, because we are aware that our citizens are worthy of respect, we respect and treat well the citizens of other nations. Consequently, there will be no more need for invading other countries or killing their citizens, nor indeed of engaging in armaments races - all of which are an extraordinary and unnatural state of affairs.

The *datong* is not extraordinary.

This follows the Doctrine of the Mean or *Zhong Yong*. The Mean denotes appropriateness and ordinariness, nothing unnatural but everything practical in the long run. It comes from, first and foremost, educating people, which in turn leads to an internalised sense of responsibility, one which is not overbearing or uncoordinated but synchronistic to family, nation and the global community. Education in the fullest sense ranges from studying things closely and pursuing intuitive knowledge to being sincere and impartial, from cultivating oneself and harmonising one's family, to good governance and bringing peace to the world. This is what is appropriate.

The new century will be an era of coexistence among various cultures and their unavoidable mutual influence. There is an alarmist reading to this, known as the Huntington thesis.(8) Professor Samuel Huntington of the United States puts forward his theory of cultural conflicts, juxtaposing the Confucian culture and the Islamic culture as the imaginary enemies of Christianity and the West generally, thereby further spreading the China threat theory. In fact, from the Confucian perspective, despite the existence of certain degrees of conflict between cultures, different cultures are complementary to each other. What is most important is the attitude we take in dealing with this conflict.

Harmony is the essence of Confucius' thought; forgiveness forms the *dao* of treating others. When PRC President Jiang Zemin visited Malaysia and South Korea during the Asian Crisis, he quoted two Confucian dictums: "Harmony is of high value" and "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", which are impressive statements in the conduct of international relations.

Harmony tolerates non-conformity.

Confucius says, a *junzi* (morally cultivated person) upholds harmony and does not push for uniformity. "Harmony" means collecting different thoughts and opinions and working for their integration, in contrast to "push for uniformity" which refuses to accommodate diverse views. Differences of opinion are unavoidable. What is important is to deal with them in an attitude of harmony and tolerance for non-conformity.

A life-affirming harmony, a soul-destroying uniformity, these are well understood by Confucianists. Not so by China threat theorists. Chinese culture has an in-built pluralism. In promoting harmony rather than uniformity, in establishing not just oneself but others as well, the Confucian-nurtured culture of China is well equipped in dealing with the complex, multi-faceted, issues that arise in the new era of global relations.

In the 2,550 years since Confucius' birth, humanity's scientific achievements have been outstanding. Advances in science and technology have also raised continuously the material standard of living. The same cannot be said for humanity's moral standard. Here the record remains grim and scientific advances cannot render assistance. On the contrary, science and technology have only enhanced the efficiency of weapons and hence their killing power. The current problems of ethnic hatred, religious intolerance, resource selfishness and economic greed cannot be solved with superior firepower or

monetary policy. In the absence of a philosophy of fidelity and forgiveness, of striving for harmony not uniformity, we torment ourselves.

We have arrived at a crucial juncture in world history, one in which science is sublime but barbarism is an everyday event, in small ways and big. Through the technology of satellite communication we see war in graphic detail, read daily of atrocities on the Internet. Confucianism's time has come, yet again, in a world of warring tribes and values. If all nations could establish public order of mutual love and international ties of mutual respect by adopting the Confucian doctrines of benevolence, righteousness, fidelity and forgiveness, then the Great *Dao* of international relations would prevail. In this Great Harmony or *datong* lies the Confucian contribution to global peace and people's happiness.

APPENDIX

When Confucius was sad about the state of the world he said in reply to a question as to why he was "overcome with sighs":

When the Great Way [*Dao*] was in practice, a public and common spirit ruled everything under Heaven; men of talent, virtue, and ability were selected; sincerity was emphasised and harmonious relationships were cultivated. Thus men did not love only their parents, nor did they treat as children only their own children. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment was given to the able-bodied, and a means was provided for the upbringing of the young. Kindness and compassion were shown to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were sufficiently maintained. . . . selfish schemings were thwarted and did not develop. Bandits and thieves, rebels and trouble-makers did not show themselves. Hence the outer doors of houses never had to be closed. This was call the Great Community [*datong*].

Now the Great Way has fallen into obscurity, . . . Each one separately loves his own parents; each looks upon his own children only as his children. People take the wealth of natural resources and the fruits of their own labors as their own. . . . Castle walls and outer defenses, moats and ditches, are made strong and secure. . . .

Excerpt only of his full reply. Hsiao, Kung-chuan (trans. F. W. Mote). *A History of Chinese Political Thought. Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to the Sixth Century A.D.* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1979, p. 125.

Footnotes

1. Dr Tong Yun Kai, MBE, is President of the *Confucian Academy*, Hong Kong.
2. 'The Chinese Utopia' (Liyun Datong Pian), *Book of Rites* (Liji). See also the *Appendix* below.
3. *The Great Learning* (Daxue)
4. *The Analects* (Lunyu), IV:15
5. *The Analects*, XII:5
6. *The Analects*, XXV:24
7. 'The Chinese Utopia' (Liyun Datong Pian), *Book of Rites* (Liji). See also the *Appendix* below.

8. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49; and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996.

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