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Of what use is an ancient philosopher, Confucius, to 21st century China?

Abstract

With an average annual growth rate in the double-digits, the People's Republic of China lifted over 500 million of its people out of poverty between 1981 and 2010.³ China is now the world's second largest economy and is predicted to overtake the United States in the coming years. All of this has been, and continues to be, achieved in a liberal global political economy. Therefore, traditional Confucian views on the undesirability of the profit motive taken verbatim are not suited to contemporary China, if it aims to continue down the path of modernisation and economic primacy. Deng Xiaoping's aphorism noting that it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, continues to be relevant in this aspect.

Keywords

tradition, contemporary, modernisation, confucian, values, ideals, useful

VIEWPOINT:

Of what use is an ancient philosopher, Confucius, to 21st Century China?¹

By Samad Aftab²

With an average annual growth rate in the double-digits, the People's Republic of China lifted over 500 million of its people out of poverty between 1981 and 2010.³ China is now the world's second largest economy and is predicted to overtake the United States in the coming years. All of this has been, and continues to be, achieved in a liberal global political economy. Therefore, traditional Confucian views on the undesirability of the profit motive taken verbatim are not suited to contemporary China, if it aims to continue down the path of modernisation and economic primacy. Deng Xiaoping's aphorism noting that it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice, continues to be relevant in this aspect.⁴

However, the Confucian cautionary attitude towards profit-seeking can be interpreted in a useful manner by 21st century China. First, it can help emphasise the importance of China not pursuing destructive economic policies in the long run. A major cause of the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis was widespread reckless lending, without any regard for whether debtors were capable of repaying their loans. This provides an important lesson for China and an opportunity for it to inculcate Confucian values that discourage greed and thoughtless action; China should aim to avoid falling under the darker side of liberal political economy, with its recurring cycles of splendid booms followed by catastrophic crashes. China has amongst the highest savings rates in the world. As the state continues to modernise, a prudent balance between consumption and savings will be an important goal; in that objective, Confucian ideals can be put to excellent use.

The Confucian view on hierarchy is useful to China if viewed from the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Confucius advocated "letting lords be lords, subjects be subjects, fathers be fathers, and sons be sons."⁵ Through discursive recourse to traditional Confucian values such as the respect of leaders and the acceptance of their preeminent roles, the CCP can continue to legitimise its rule

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet academic criteria.

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³ *China Overview*. (n.d.). Retrieved August 14, 2014, from The World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

⁴ Liao, W. (2009, July 10). *China's Black Cat, White Cat Diplomacy: Why Beijing is losing patience with its dysfunctional allies*. Retrieved August 14, 2014, from Foreign Policy: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/07/10/chinas_black_cat_white_cat_diplomacy

⁵ Hu, S. (2007). Confucianism and Contemporary Chinese Politics. *Politics & Policy*, 35 (1), 136-153.

and policies. However, as China continues to modernise, a larger proportion of its citizens will be constituted by educated graduates who will not only require employment, but might also question the authoritarian rule of the state. Studies have demonstrated that increased development tends to increase democratic values in citizens.⁶ The CCP will need to legitimise its continued authority in the state; appealing to traditional Confucian values may prove an effective method of doing this. Emphasising the teaching of Confucian values from a young age and encouraging precepts of the philosophy that reify the importance of respecting benevolent hierarchy can play an essential role for the CCP.

But the Confucian take on hierarchy, as well as family relations, is anachronistic in some areas. First, certain aspects of Confucianism tend to advocate the subservience of women to men. Wives are encouraged to be dutiful towards their husbands.⁷ This aspect of the philosophy is not desirable in the modern era. Women constituted 46% of the labour force in China in 2011. However, traditional Chinese values still tend to place pressure on women, even if they are employed, to take sole charge of looking after the household.⁸ Therefore, archaic views on the role of women in society should be disregarded, and parity between the two sexes be encouraged.

A skewed perception of the relevance of hierarchy also runs the danger of encouraging irresponsible leadership. For example, contemporary China suffers from very high levels of pollution and environmental degradation. This incurs a devastating impact on the Chinese populace, and is clearly a problem that needs significant attention. If serious efforts are not taken to reduce Chinese pollution, questions over the benevolence, as defined by Confucianism, of leaders will proliferate. Hu notes: “Confucius believed the interests of rulers and people to be closely related and mutually beneficial. Among the three prerequisites of government – sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and people’s trust – Confucius viewed the last one as the most indispensable.”⁹ Consequently, the CCP is obliged to tackle severe issues such as pollution in a persuasive and effective manner. Otherwise, it runs the risk of losing the trust of the populace. It is important to note that Mencius, the most well known Confucian scholar after Confucius, justified rebellion against the state as a legitimate activity if the interests and policies of the rulers are not directly aligned with the well-being of the people. Hierarchy, thus, can only be justified if it is of a benevolent nature.

Confucianism can also play an essential role in the projection of Chinese soft power. Joseph Nye defines soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹⁰ Soft power can be projected along three

⁶ Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2009). How Development Leads to Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 33-48.

⁷ Gao, X. (2003). Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China. *Race, Gender & Class*, 10 (3), 114-125.

⁸ *Women in China: The Sky's the Limit - But it's not exactly heaven*. (2011, November 26). Retrieved August 14, 2014, from The Economist: <http://www.economist.com/node/2153993>

⁹ Hu (2007: 148).

¹⁰ Benavides, M. (2012, August). *When Soft Power is Too Soft: Confucius Institutes' Nebulous Role in China's Soft Power Initiative*. Retrieved August 14, 2014, from The Yale Review of International Studies: http://yris.yira.org/essays/644#_ftn10

dimensions: economic, diplomatic and cultural. The propagation of Confucian values as a form of soft power can help to legitimise the rise of China in the international realm, and downplay the “China Threat” narrative. It is not surprising therefore that a 2011 CCP communiqué emphasised the importance of bolstering its cultural soft power and the need to “reverse a deficit in global cultural exchanges.”¹¹

However, such soft power projection should distinguish between Confucian aspects that may be perceived as attractive in foreign states and those that are unlikely to be received well. For example, as noted above, traditional Confucius attitudes towards profit are not relevant to the contemporary global political economy. Furthermore, the manner in which Confucianism is presented may require to be varied from state to state. In countries such as the United States and Australia, certain conservative elements of Confucianism would clash with local values. On the contrary, these same elements might be perceived as attractive to audiences in regions such as South Asia and the Middle East.

Confucian values of balance, peace and harmony are relevant to China’s rise as a great power. Should Chinese modernisation continue to occur in a rules-based international order with the US as the present hegemon? Or should China aim to revise the precepts that underlie the international structure? The latter choice presents a precarious avenue and runs the risk of a conflict between China, and the US and its allies. The simmering tensions in the Asia-Pacific are primarily driven by concerns amongst China’s neighbours regarding Beijing’s intentions. China’s significant military build-up over recent years has led to security dilemmas, with consequences such as Japan aiming to modify its strictly defensive security policy.

China has attempted to dispel concerns in the international community over its rise by elucidating phrases with Confucian connotations, such as “peaceful rise” and “harmonious regionalism” to describe its intentions in the Asia-Pacific. However, as of yet, it has not managed to convince its neighbours and the US that it means to abide by such statements. According to Confucian values, states should not pursue offensive wars. China must avoid bellicose behaviour in the region. It should make efforts to resolve its territorial claims in the region through diplomacy and compromise. If it does not do so, the “China Threat” narrative will result in a self-fulfilling prophecy as further military build-ups in the region ensue, which will then necessitate a Chinese response.

So the teachings of an ancient philosopher, Confucius, and Confucianism in general, should not be cast aside in the midst of rapid modernisation. They remain relevant to China in the 21st century. What remains imperative, however, is the prudent interpretation and thoughtful application of such a philosophy.

¹¹ Ibid.