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2009 Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad to China Project

Curriculum Project

Confucius's Legacy on the Chinese Character

I feel exhilarated because I am in my element: an antique market in old Shanghai. Of course what these vendors call “antique” with deadpan irony is highly debatable. Most of the objects are interesting and exotic enough to tempt a tourist like me, even if Qing Dynasty knickknacks were minted yesterday and the “jade” jewelry makes a suspiciously dull clunk when I rap it with a real piece of jade I brought along. I bend forward to watch a young artisan carve my name on a chop. While his hand moves the chisel on the soft stone with swift, expert strokes, I feel a soft tap on my shoulder. A man in a green coat is trying to hand me a wad of ten and twenty yuan notes! He regards my perplexed look, points to the dirt road behind us, and makes a stabbing motion at my open purse. After closing my finger over the money he places in my hand, he saunters away. I turn to the chop artisan with mouth agape. In a way as if to question my surprise, he tells me this honest man only did his moral duty. Nothing extraordinary—at least not to Chinese who adhere to ancient Confucian tenets. I had just witnessed an action of grace fueled by the teachings of a man who lived some 2600 years ago, a man who time cannot diminish.

What might have given the ethical grounding to this honorable, green coated man is a philosophy that evolved during some of China's most tumultuous eras, the Spring and Autumn Period as well as the Period of the Warring States. Out of this turmoil arose Confucius, a man who dedicated his life to finding an antidote to chaos and fostering a

society of peace and harmony. Born Kung Fu-tzu in 551 BCE in Qufu, Confucius (his Latinized name) was a contemporary of two other great men who, like him, engraved their signatures on the Chinese character: Lao-Tze, of whom he was a disciple, and Buddha. Like both men he leapt off the pages of history into legend and ultimately into myth. Confucius's teachings become codified in the *Analects*, whose chapters are grouped thematically. His primary mission was teaching government officials how to conduct themselves in order to achieve peace and harmony. A failed politician, he withdrew from politics for reasons of conflicts with his personal values; consequently, he was able to draw on rich personal experience. Oppressive taxation, corrupt governance, warlordism, and greed were all hallmarks of his time. When Confucius set his mind to analyze how to solve the societal problems of his day, he decided to focus on the way rulers should behave toward their subordinates, subordinates to those further down, and so on. He wrote, "The Ruler himself should be virtuous, just, honest and dutiful. A virtuous ruler is like the Pole-star which, by keeping its place, makes all other stars to evolve round it. As is the Ruler, so will be the subjects." Clearly he believed in trickle down virtue from the emperor to the peasant farmer. What Confucius promulgated evolved into more of a political, educational, and ethical philosophy than a religion.

Confucian thought's main tenet is harmony, the concept of *Jin* its keystone. Thought to be untranslatable, *Jin* is roughly equivalent to social virtue. "All those virtues which help to maintain social harmony and peace like benevolence, charity, magnanimity, sincerity, respectfulness, altruism, diligence, loving kindness, goodness are included in *Jin*" (Dominguez). The amalgamation of *Jin* with harmony forms a causal relationship that leads to social stability and civic virtue. Professor Xinzhong Yao underscores why

the locus of Confucian philosophy is harmony: “The combination of learning and practice, the unity between knowledge and virtue and the identification between self-cultivation and transcendence presuppose that harmony is the central theme for Confucianism. It is in this sense that Confucianism is also called a religion of harmony.” Confucius himself summed up what constituted perfect virtue: gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness, ideals that lent harmony and rectitude in dealing with one’s own life and others in the community (Dominguez).

In Confucius’s hierarchy of relationships the most important one is emperor to subjects, followed by father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and finally elder friend to younger friend. (Conspicuously, this ranking mentions women only once.) Subordinates thus pay obeisance to superiors, who have more power but nevertheless are obliged to conduct themselves with charity and responsibility toward their inferiors (Larsen). In addition, these five relationships encompass the state, the community, the family, and the individual, the end being the greater good of all four. Even today strangers still address one another as brother or sister (Lin-Liu). Confucius posited that individuals had their roles in society, their behavior following suit in terms of obedience to the ones above them in the hierarchy and benevolence to those below them. Thus, if people perform their duties correctly, harmony will prevail. One of the pillars that informs modern China is the concept of harmony, the fundamental, driving force of Confucius’s philosophy. In this the twenty-first century a strong authoritarian state in China imposes harmony from the top down, quite different from the Confucian harmony which emanates from the goodness of each individual.

This hierarchy, which interlocks the five relationships in an upward spiral with the individual on the bottom and the state on top, helps us in the West better understand the Chinese collectivist nature. How face relates to collectivism became clearer to me after I listened to a lecture from Gao Yanli of Peking University. Dr. Gao pointed out that when Confucius's ideas took root in China, others could criticize persons if they were not following The Way. If another individual or the community pointed out the errors and failings of an individual, the one who deviated from the Way lost face. Dr. Gao informed us that Christians accept human propensity to sin; love and forgiveness neutralize sin's venom. "Love the sinner but hate the sin." The Chinese, on the other hand, are not so tolerant of human transgression. For others to point out an inequity is a source of deep shame to a transgressor in a collectivist society. Because The Way clearly provides a guide to correct behavior, deviants should undergo public censure. Mao understood the power of face and its loss when he paraded his enemies through the streets in buffoon getups during the Cultural Revolution. Though any person, Westerner or Chinese, would experience shame given the humiliating circumstances, it would seem to be particularly so to the Chinese.

Thus harmony becomes indistinguishable from moral purity and virtuousness in Chinese culture. In the USA our early Puritan forbearers believed that humankind's fundamental character was one of total depravity. Vestiges of that stance are still visible in our culture today. China's Confucian ancestors, however, believed that humankind is basically good. Furthermore, it is a person's duty to perfect individual character and aspire to become unselfish, noble, righteous, and incorruptible. Unlike our Puritan forefathers, who maintained that we are unable to attain a righteous state without

unconditional reliance on an angry God, the Confucian Chinese rise above pettiness and evil with strength of will and the endowments of integrity. Inferior people will always cling to the temporal and material, but noble Confucians are content with the rewards of virtue for virtue's sake.

The center of gravity of Confucian philosophy lies in the quest for equilibrium and harmony (*zhi zhong he*). The whole tradition of Confucianism developed out of the deliberations about how to establish or reestablish harmony in conflicts and disorder. For Confucianism harmony is the essence of the universe and of human existence. Harmony was manifested in ancient time when virtues prevailed in the world. Since then, harmony has been replaced by chaos and disorder, as the result of the diminishing of the virtues. To re-establish or to restore harmony is thus the aim and purpose of the Confucian endeavour and becomes the core of the Confucian doctrines. Harmony underlines the unity between individuals and all other people. Thus, to realise equilibrium and harmony is regarded as each individual's duty to the whole of humanity. Harmony is also the unity between humanity and the universe. Therefore, to establish harmony in the world is the human responsibility for the cosmos. Harmony is the link between the sacred and the secular. Therefore, to realise harmony is to transform and to transcend. On the one hand, harmony is an ideal, which must be strived for. On the other, it is existent in human nature, and when feelings and action are perfectly balanced, a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish (qtd. in Yao in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, in *The Chinese*

Classics, tr. by James Legge, second edition, Oxford University Press 1961, pp 249ff.).

One hears echoes of humanism and the human struggle toward perfection. Confucian ideals are not unlike the precepts of the Enlightenment in the West, ideals on which our country is founded. Benjamin Franklin expressed a philosophy similar to Confucius's in his *Autobiography*:

I grew convinced that *Truth, Sincerity, and Integrity* in Dealings between Man and Man, were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of life, and I form'd written Resolutions...to practice them ever while I lived...I entertain'd an Opinion, that tho' certain Actions might not be bad *because* they were forbidden by it, or good *because* it commanded them; yet probably those Actions might be forbidden *because* they were bad for us, or commanded *because* they were beneficial to us, in their own Natures, all the Circumstances of things considered (260-61).

Franklin used the faculty of human Reason to work out something both practical and simple: the virtuous life is the only life worth living because it is not only sane but brings peace and harmony to the individual as well as to society. Virtue is the essence of commonsense. Thus Reason, virtue, and harmony become so intertwined that their lines of demarcation blur. Not incidentally, Franklin was trying to work out how people could coexist in community to gain the maximum benefit for all, unlike the Puritan, who emphasized the individual and personal salvation. The movement that followed the American Enlightenment was Romanticism, which swung the pendulum back to

underscore individualism. It was not until the Great Depression of the 1930s did America tilt back toward a collectivist orientation.

Like Confucius, Franklin grounded himself in the here and now, this present life. Both focused on how to make an earthly existence into something more akin to a paradise rather than the veil of tears the Puritans believed it was. Both would probably agree that the hereafter comes as a consequence of present actions. Cosmic order demands humans pay attention to their moral character. In a kind of cause and effect cycle, individual morality leads to social harmony which in turn creates cosmic equilibrium. In other words, people who have cultivated within themselves high moral character use virtuous actions to resolve earthly conflicts which lead to social order which in turn results in cosmic harmony (Yao). The question then becomes how to find solutions to conflicts, inevitable in human affairs.

Confucius furnished a three-way process to overcoming human strife. First, conflicts occur when people of uncultivated moral character exercise power over others (Yao). In *The Analects*, 7:3, Confucius wrote what he considered the antecedents to corrupt authority: “failure to cultivate virtues, inability to study thoroughly what is taught, being unable to go for what is right, and unwilling to correct the faults.” Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams adhered to the idea of a “natural aristocracy.” In a letter to John Adams, Jefferson wrote, “There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talent.” No matter what social standing people came from, if they practiced high morals and lived lives of controlled behavior and integrity, they were royalty. Second, in dealing with conflicts, people should always look first at their own contributions to the problem and make a thorough inventory of their own failings rather

than reproach or blame others (Yao). Confucius used archery as a metaphor to illustrate this concept: “In archery we have something resembling the Way of the virtuous. When the archer misses the center of the target, he turns around and seeks for the cause of failure within himself” (qtd. in Yao in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 14). Most Americans, on the other hand, find it easier to blame others than take stock of themselves. Third, if all people work diligently at cultivating their moral character, then peace and harmony are inevitable results (Yao). In the *Analects*, 14:42, Confucius discusses the concept of *junzi*, roughly translated as a noble person deserving of respect and emulation because of his moral behavior. “He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence... He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men...He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to all people”(qtd in Yao). The Emperor, leader and focal point of this moral system, should be an exemplary role model for others in the chain beneath him to emulate. *The Purpose Driven Life, Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, and similar bestsellers are basic Confucius repackaged to speak to yet another generation.

Both Franklin and Confucius held to the belief that a principled character combined with rigorous self inventory can lead to wisdom. This knowledge is derived from neither a book like the Bible that the Puritans adhered to nor to divine inspiration from the “oversoul” like American Transcendentalists believed. Following The Way meant constant self-analysis and self-evolution through distilling one’s life experiences into wisdom. The transformative power of developing a moral compass and adhering to principles and values despite temptations to the contrary will result in harmony within the state, the community, and the family. Both men were pragmatists: if an action brings

peace and harmony among people, it is probably moral. Central to this ethical stance is Confucius's approximation of the Christian's Golden Rule but with a slight twist: What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others (*Analects*). Ethical/Moral becomes indistinguishable from Reason/Common Sense. Both men held that a close approximation to perfection on earth will eventually result, bringing peace, harmony, justice, and prosperity. Confucius laid out the roadmap to self-transformation in his *Analects* and Franklin in his *Autobiography*. Franklin went so far as to detail his scheme for moral perfection in a fashion that anticipates B.F. Skinner's behavioral conditioning.

China adopted Confucius's teachings, modifying them through the centuries to suit (or justify) the needs of its different dynasties for an impressive 2500 years. His philosophy so dominated the Chinese that it became part of their cultural DNA. A fast forward through time shows Confucius's philosophy an inextricable companion to Chinese history, evolving through the dynasties to address a particular era's issues or splitting into such branches as the School of Reason and the School of the Mind, further getting buffeted and honed when it competed with other philosophies like Legalism. During its progression in history Confucianism entwined itself with Taoism and Buddhism to create a unique and potent synthesis. It had plenty more time to solidify and harden inside the Chinese character than any of our philosophies have in the US. Jesus answered the requirements of Western Europe, Buddha the East, Mohammed the Middle East and Africa, and Confucius China and other parts of East Asia. Like all four men, he walked through the corridors of time to become a figure of mythic proportions. Like them, his adherents split, branched off, and divided still again and again in a reinterpretation of his teachings. All four philosophies/religions have survived largely because of their

plasticity, endowing them with relevance through the millennia. I can't help but muse how rational a formula for personal, familial, and civic success Confucius offers. Despite its nobility, however, Confucianism was to undergo revilement and repudiation from its own people before it returned to favor again. The era when the Chinese heaped scorn on Confucius coincided with their own humiliation.

Perhaps one of the US's greatest gifts is how young a country it still is. Americans have not had centuries to solidify a national character like the Chinese have. We are in a constant state of reinvention and experimentation. We move too fast for intellectual or spiritual osteoporosis to sabotage us. Instead of isolationism, a policy the Chinese practiced for centuries, America welcomes immigrants and the new ideas they bring with them. As the French writer and commentator on the early American scene St. Jean De Crevecoeur observed in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, the juxtaposition of so many nationalities with their influx of different customs could not help but shape us into a new breed entirely. De Crevecoeur writes, "Who traverses the continent must easily observe those strong differences, which will grow more evident in time. The inhabitants of Canada, Massachusetts, the middle provinces, the southern ones will be as different as their climates; their only points of unity will be their religion and language" (298). For centuries the Chinese reinterpreted Confucian philosophy to suit their times. The philosophy and its advocates experienced periods of persecution and periods of ascendancy, the apex of which was the Song (969-1279 AD) and Ming (1368-1644 AD) Dynasties. One consequence of its triumph was that it quashed other competing thoughts. "It also," Yao Xinzong believes, "cost the life of Confucianism, which was changed from a living stream to a stagnant pool." Perhaps due to lack of dissent,

competing philosophies, and/or complacency, Confucianism entrenched itself and stopped growing. A vicious but nevertheless predictable cycle began to take place. In order to become a government official, men had to pass a difficult exam based on Confucianism's precepts. Once in power, those officials would by necessity perpetuate the very system that gave them the reins of power, which in turn would brook no changes. New officials came in with the same old ideas (Larsen).

Even more disastrous for the Chinese, however, was their attitude of moral superiority in part derived from following the tenets of Confucius. "If we have purged ourselves of moral turpitude and thereby achieved harmony, and if we have all the resources we could possibly need, what could other cultures possibly offer us?" they might plausibly have asked. (I hear echoes of our lamplighter Puritans, smug in their belief that they were the Elect.) As the inventors of paper, the compass, printing, gun powder, and much more long before the West, what could Barbarians, aka outsiders, non-Han, have to enlighten them? As Han identity solidified, this belief of racial and cultural superiority led to a detachment from things foreign along with a truculent disposition toward the West and what it stood for. Professor Jue Wang used the expression "expand your eyesight," which means try to become multicultural, that is, more knowledgeable about the world. Another lecturer referred to China's reluctance to look outward as "Middle Kingdom mentality." "This unwillingness to adopt Western ideas and techniques in the late 19th and early 20th centuries proved to be disastrous for the Chinese: 100 years of humiliation" (Larsen).

Nobel Prize winner William Faulkner opined that the only thing worse than death is shame. One can look back a little over a hundred years to the shame the US's South

endured after the Civil War, the consequences of which are still manifest today. China had turned her noble back while the West armed itself and sensed China's vulnerability. Moreover, these powers had definite imperialistic designs. During the Opium Wars and the Boxer Rebellions, China stood helpless as superpowers bit delectable chunks of her corporal body and ripped open five of her ports for trade with the clever ruse of "leasing" from her. Was "lease" a euphemism for "devour"? Britain won such a lease of Hong Kong, "Fragrant Harbor," and later Kowloon for ninety-nine years. China suffered deeply the savage terms the Western powers foisted upon her. The West, however, was not the only ravenous power. In an informal conversation in Shanghai on July 24, 2009, Dr. Craig Canning talked about how in the late 19th century Japan paid close attention to certain Western ideas and technology while an isolationist China had very little if any sense of the seismic rumblings. Once also an isolationist country, Japan sniffed the way the winds were blowing, and they were definitely blowing from the West. The Japanese along with Great Britain, France, Russia, the USA, and three other super powers—eight in all—cornered China into humiliating submission. Russia gnawed off huge chunks to the north while Germany swallowed parts of Korea and the Shandong Peninsula to build a railroad and secure mineral rights. Later, after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Japan got the meaty Shandong area as its spoils of war. Chinese students in the famous May Fourth Movement decried this loss and their government's acquiescence. They vilified Confucius as a symbol of obstruction to modernization. "Overthrow Confucius and Sons!" and "Deposit the stitched volumes in the toilet for thirty years!" (qtd. in Ho) Confucius represented a roadblock to reform, which included embracing science and democracy. Qufu, Confucius's home town, is in Shandong, a curious irony. All in all,

the scramble for concessions was a Darwinian Serengeti where China was the wounded animal pursued by ferocious predators.

China's ignorance about her enemies was appalling. Chinese power brokers might have asked questions like "Where's Britain? In Russia? A queen rules? You have to be kidding!" China would have been well advised to heed Sun-Tzu, ancient Chinese general and military strategist, who said, "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer." The Qing emperors had little knowledge of foreign policy and even less assistance from knowledgeable advisors. China soon learned the nature of her Western enemies just like our Native Americans did. Professor Ni Shixiong, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, outlined China's disastrous response to the Western powers when they asked her to open her doors to trade. What could the Barbarians possibly have that we want? We don't need your trade goods anyway because we have everything we want. Why should we do business with you (more of a rhetorical question though I doubt the West comprehended the irony)? Shocking, but in the last years of the Qing Dynasty China had no ambassadors to other countries. "Foreign affairs" was an irrelevant concept to an isolationist country. Because China had no expertise in negotiating with foreign powers, her first ambassador was a sympathetic American who finagled a better deal for China than she otherwise would have gotten, according to Professor Ni. Shortly afterwards a Chinese national was at the receiving end of a round of criticism for wanting to represent Chinese interests to the Barbarians. Even more shocking, he wanted to take his wife with him on his diplomatic missions, betraying China's anachronistic attitudes toward women. The Chinese could barely comprehend an American election where people vote a President into office but only for four or eight year tenures. That fact shook

Confucianism notions of hierarchical order to its foundation. In the British Parliament MPs roundly criticized one another, often in boisterous, insulting (to the Chinese) fashion, a clear affront to the notion of face and Confucian decorum. Is that your culture? We don't need you or your ideas, thank you very much. What followed was a lesson to China in why not to be ethnocentric. After the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1901) China established protocols for a foreign ministry to replace the ineffectual, outdated 19th and early 20th centuries bureaucracy for dealing with foreigners, but by then it was too little too late (Ni).

China's internal corruption—from the massive poverty of its people to an iniquitous, effete dynasty and its minions headed by effete emperors and empress-- pretty much put her signature on her own death warrant. No tenet from a Confucian text could remedy this desperate situation. In fact, Confucius himself would become the whipping boy for China's humiliation. China's worse nightmares about opening itself to the world become reality. No magnificent wall that guarded the Middle Kingdom could withstand the barbarian marauders any more than Rome could, internally gangrenous as well 2000 years before.

Can further blame for China's collapse be attributed to Confucianism itself? Confucianism deeply distrusts martial arts and holds military violence in contempt except for two reasons: to defend against invasion and aggression from foreign powers or to topple a corrupt government. Confucian adherents refrain from forcing their ideology upon others because they regard it as counterproductive. To impose one's values on another is presumptuous at best and useless at worst (Yao). The core value of Confucius's philosophy is intellectual and moral investigation, not military aggression.

Confucian sayings like "you don't make good iron into nails, nor good men into soldiers" clearly state Chinese objections toward hegemony. A footnote (21) in Dr. Xinzhong Yao's article explains this peaceful orientation. "The Chinese have always praised and prized civilian virtues above military ones...This attitude may be connected with a prejudice against the use of force which runs throughout Chinese history...There have also, of course, been many armed rebellions, but the tendency to rely on persuasion and mediation has persisted" (qtd in Yao from Joseph Needham, in *China and the West: Mankind Evolving*, 1970, p 22). Confucius was promulgating an ideal of peace, not war. He understood that competition and dissension precipitate aggression, which prevents peaceable solutions. He illustrates his stance in an archery analogy: "A gentleman never goes to contentions. If he cannot avoid them, [then as] in archery, he bows to his competitor and yields him the way as they ascend (to the pavilion) and coming down they drink together. Even in his contention, he is still a gentleman" (*The Analects*, 3:7). Of course China endured war almost without cease during the course of its long history despite venerating a pacifist philosopher.

In a lecture in Beijing on July 1, 2009, at the CEAIE headquarters, I felt both surprise and suspicion about the notion of the Chinese policy to practice non-aggrandizement that our Chinese-American lecturer asserted. Look what the Soviets did in Eastern Europe, and didn't the USSR and China share the same ideology? In a conversation with Professor Craig Canning afterward, I expressed my mistrust. I had grown up with the threat of communism in the 1950s and remembered the air raid drills where we hid under our little school desks. I had been indoctrinated in the 1960s to the domino theory of The Red Menace during the Viet Nam War when I was taught to believe the Chinese along

with their Soviet cronies were prepared to take over the world and foist their evil dogma on us if the warriors of democracy did not contain their threat. Dr. Canning fully concurred with our lecturer, adding that despite fears to the contrary, China has been a conciliatory player in the U.N. since joining on October 25, 1971.

Those Cold War, anti-communist voices are less shrill now, but I am still wary. Days later this topic came up with another Chinese lecturer. I asked why China stands by while the rogue state North Korea threatens the world with a terrifying arsenal of nuclear weapons. After all, North Korea borders China. His answer was thoughtful and patient. In essence, China knows all too well because of the 100 Years of Humiliation what it feels like when superiorly armed foreign powers meddle in its internal affairs and then practice snatch and grab on China's sovereign land. It would be hypocritical for the Chinese to reciprocate in kind to North Korea, which has not rattled its sabers at China. What the professor did not address was the potential for an enormous influx of refugees from a collapsed North Korean state into northeastern China, which has not enjoyed the prosperity other parts of China do. The challenges facing China's leaders and her infrastructure are ones they would prefer not to face, so maintaining the status quo is highly pragmatic.

I thought about our invasion of Iraq in order to topple its regime and promulgate democracy. Look at the mess the US is in. China's default button is "mind my own business" unless there is a clear threat to national security. The legacy of both Confucian non-violence and 100 Years of Humiliation cause China to steer a pragmatic course which avoids quagmires. I also recall China's persistent voice in the U.N. to use diplomacy and statecraft to achieve peaceful ends, not military action. And as a post

script, I notice by its conspicuous absence terrorist acts committed in the name of Confucius unlike those found in other religions and philosophies both past and present.

The horrific unraveling of the Chinese empire continued into the 20th century with superpowers biting off chunks of her. A kind of relentless determinism prevailed. Dr. Sun Yat-sen brought the first glimpse of hope for national reunification and a return of pride. Then a ferocious civil war between the communist and the Nationalist Party erupted. The adversaries briefly cooperated during World War II to fight a more insidious and bellicose enemy, the Japanese, who had already tasted Chinese blood and developed a fondness for it. Dr. Zhang Jin, professor of literature and journalism at Chongqing University, brought home to us the heartrending, inexorable way the war with Japan played out in Chongqing, aka “Beibei,” China’s “little wartime capital within the wartime capital.” This sleepy city woke to life quickly in 1939 to become the focus of Chinese resistance to yet a second Japanese invasion in a few decades. Two fifths of Chinese soldiers lost their lives trying to bog down the Japanese military machine, providing a huge drain on their and our adversary, enabling the Allies to finally crush them. Yet to my certain knowledge, the West has given little to no credit for the valor and suffering of the Chinese people during this period. In fact, Dr. Zhang showed us an article from *Life* magazine of that period which was condescending and clearly blamed the Chinese for their troubles. I could see and hear the hurt and anger in Dr. Zhang. China lost fifteen to twenty million people to the Japanese, whose bombings precipitated the biggest internal migration in history. Over sixty million people fled inland beginning in 1939.

A digression: I looked across Chongqing's magnificent waterfront one night, all aglow with its garishly lit buildings, some with animated ads projected onto their edifices—who needs television? Here is a city the ghosts from World War II would hardly recognize. Skyscrapers literally scrape the sky as New York style taxis zoom past the river walkway. All the Japanese companies whose logos decorate these buildings strike a contradiction. Mitsubishi, Sony Corp, Nissan, the list goes on and on. I asked one of our young guides about this paradox: how can a mortal enemy who wreaked so much havoc and heartbreak be allowed to profit from the very people it almost crushed? Can the Chinese forgive and apparently forget that easily? “Oh, no, we don't forget. No, not at all. We'll buy their merchandise because it suits our taste, but we still despise them.” I recalled Dr. Zhang telling us about her son's decision to learn Japanese at university, a source of shame and disappointment to her, especially when she had to tell her friends. That evening I got on our hotel elevator with a couple of young Chinese ladies. On the way down, a group of Japanese tourists entered the elevator. I glanced over at two Chinese women who crowded to one corner as one of them pinched her nose and grimaced in the universal nonverbal language of a foul odor. They giggled conspiratorially. Japan, Disturber of Harmony—it is a bitter taste that lingers still.

The rivalry between the Nationalists and the Communist resumed after World II, and in 1949 Mao emerged as the clear winner. Through his epic Long Great March and a carefully designed campaign to fulfill the Chinese dream of reunification after ousting the barbarians, Mao gave China back to China. The Nationalists retreated to Taiwan and claimed itself the true China. Whatever evils can be ascribed to Mao, and there are plenty, he did reunify his country and gave the people back something they had not

possessed for 100 years, their pride. Throughout my sojourn in China, I kept hearing people say, "Mao was 70% right." Acknowledgement of that other thirty percent is a considerable stride indeed. (After someone asked if a middle school's pool had safe enough water to swim in, one of our Fulbrighters quipped, "Seventy percent of it is.") What goes into the thirty percent "wrong" portion, however, was Mao's vilifying of Confucian principles as hierarchical, feudal, bourgeois, and moribund (McGivering). James Skillen, President of the Center for Public Justice,* writes about the manic fervor with which Mao attacked Confucius:

The religious zeal that characterized the communist regime of Mao Zedong (from 1949 to 1976) led him to attack Confucius as an outdated drag on the transformation of China. Mao destroyed the temple that honored Confucius in the ancient philosopher's hometown of Qufu. As a comprehensive wisdom for life, Confucianism was a major roadblock to Mao's plan to radically transform

And a radical plan it was. Mao exhorted the peasants to melt down their plowshares for the metal it would take to industrialize the nation at warp speed, not heeding saner voices that might have told him the people would starve. Estimates vary but perhaps thirty million people died from famine as a result. The Great Leap Forward proved to be the Great Bungle, and the Cultural Revolution segued fast into cultural suicide. Hong Kong residents told me when I visited there in 1969 how the river ran red with the bodies Mao floated down into the harbor. Why Confucianism did not suit Mao's needs is unclear to me, especially with its strong authoritarian convictions. I am tempted to believe much of Mao's Reign of Terror went against basic Confucian principles.

Besides, how did Mao hope to excise Confucianism from the Chinese character, ingrained as it was in the very bone marrow? Erasing two and a half thousand years of

* The CPJ describes itself and its mission as follows: “The Center for Public Justice is an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to public policy research, leadership development, and civic education. With a distinctive Christian-democratic perspective, we help citizens, policymakers, and government respond to the call to pursue justice for all.”

inculcation was a formidable task for a single generation to accomplish. Faulkner said, “The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.”

On the other hand, Mao did capitalize, consciously or unconsciously, on certain Confucian elements.

It may be surprising, then, to realize that Mao's attempt to build a new kind of society based on his own wisdom—published as a devotional guide in his little Red Book—led him to assume a position similar to that of earlier Confucian emperors. Mao adopted a role like that of the ancient Son of Heaven (the emperor) who was empowered by the Mandate of Heaven to establish a harmonious Confucian social order (Skillen).

When I watched a PBS documentary with its old reels of the Great Helmsman, what struck me was how he came to be deified in his lifetime. A bevy of fawning beauties crowded him here and party sycophants there, and always huge crowds worshipped him waving their copies of his Little Red Book. Centuries of conditioning had taught the Chinese people to accept the emperor as God, the pinnacle of the Confucian pyramid, and who was Mao but the savior who restored China to its former glory and dignity. The pinnacle was monstrously inverted, however, according to Confucius. Now the lowest, the peasants, were on top. Scholars, intellectuals, professors and other strata Confucius revered during the old times were among the most persecuted during the Cultural

Revolution. They and other non-peasants found themselves at hard labor in the countryside. Students pummeled their professors, spouses condemned one another, children spilled family secrets to the authorities, and neighbors accused each other of being class enemies. Dr. Pi Ching Hsu, one of our lecturers in California, told us Mao bragged about burying 46,000 scholars, considerably more than the 460 one ancient emperor boasted.

Mao's body lies in repose in the heart of the Republic, Tiananmen Square, like Lenin, Napoleon, and other immortals who have their sanctuaries of worship. Mao's legacy is hardly one of harmony although he accomplished no mean feat by reuniting China. Again estimates vary, but he is responsible for the butchery of millions of people not only in the Great Leap Forward but in the aftermaths of the various political campaigns of the 1950s up to the 1970s. I noted that young adults largely dismiss Mao though they acknowledge his contributions, especially in unifying China. Many in the older generations, the ones who suffered the most under his reign, still revere him. I wondered if he would reel in his tomb if he knew that some of Beijing's most expensive shops hawking luxury goods were a short walk from his burial shrine.

Deng Xiaoping, who took over after Mao's death, is one of modern China's greatest men in my estimation. Under his and his successors' direction, pragmatists all, China moved forward by feeling the stones in the river one at a time, a proverb in much currency now. Perhaps Confucianism was stirring awake even as far back as 1989. William Theodore de Bary, Columbia University scholar and Provost Emeritus, believes "China is looking for something to take the place of a failed Marxism." De Bary found it more than a coincidence that a few weeks after Beijing crushed pro-democracy

demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, Deng celebrated Confucius's birthday with then President Jiang Zemin in attendance (*Columbia University Record*).

What has evolved from Deng's time to the present is a strange hybrid of capitalism and communism, a marriage between a strong, authoritarian central government with a freewheeling, Wild West kind of commerce. There are few stranger bedfellows in modern history. The business of China appears to be business. In every one of the cities I visited huge shopping malls dwarfed mom and pop stores, and I had to go on something of a hunt before I could find traditional markets. *Hutongs*,* national treasures but disdained by many young people as too old fashioned, are daily razed to make way for high-rises and human silos. With capitalism and its emphasis on the buying and selling of goods, China's moral fabric is distinctly different from any other time in her history. We do not have to look farther than our own shores to see where consumerism can take a culture. The Chinese are experiencing widening economic gaps between haves and have-nots; the influx of huge tides of country people impelled by poverty, inundating unprepared cities; the overburdened schools; the disproportionate development and influx of resources in the south and east but not the north and the west; uprisings among ethnic groups like the Uyghurs; the fallout of globalization and more.

China is experiencing a spiritual void right now, and voids tend to fill quickly. The Falun Gong movement and religions like Christianity have made beachheads and worry a government that likes strong control over all its citizenry. Ethnic unrest rumbles like ominous thunder on the horizon. In July when we were in China, the Uyghurs were rioting and protesting work conditions. What could be a better antidote than to take out an old philosophy that has lain dormant for a not so long time (relative to China's

history), a philosophy that does not have religious or proselytizing designs, that provides a clear moral agenda, that is imprinted deeply in the cultural identity already, and that is clearly moral ballast in a roiling sea of change? The Master, de-vilified finally, has been

*Traditional neighborhoods hundreds of years old with homes passed down from generation to generation. They meander organically like a warren.

reinstated to serve his country again. James Skillen notes, “The present government in China senses that its moral authority is weaker than Mao's and much less potent than the emperors of old enjoyed, who nurtured strong Confucian moral bonds with the people (at least in principle). This may be the reason why the Communist Party today is quietly and even publicly beginning to reinstate Confucius.”

One of our Chinese lecturers commented that the Chinese are scouting all over the globe to find what is working and what is not in other countries. They cross the river one stone at a time, but the clever Chinese are following after others in the stream, watching closely to learn from their mistakes and successes. Li Guang-bing of Wuhan, founder of a weekend school that teaches children Confucian precepts, remarked, “We should combine our Chinese traditional culture with the best from the West” (qtd. in McGivering). He already has opened seven additional schools due to enthusiastic parental demand and plans a hundred more. At Beijing's august Tsinghua University, Confucius's statue now stands, replacing one of Mao (Ash). Even today high school students make pilgrimages to Confucian temples to pray for good luck in passing their exams (Lin-Liu). Though journalist Timothy Ash dubbed her book “pop-Confucianism,” a “Chinese Chicken Soup for the Soul,” Beijing Normal University professor and writer Yu Dan sold an impressive ten million copies of her bestseller, *Notes on The Analects of Confucius*. A 150 million yuan epic movie starring luminary Chow Yun-Fat in the role

of the Great Sage, a television series, and an animated series on Confucius's life and teachings have debuted, enjoying great popularity (Mu). Weidong Zhang of Winona State University noted the problems modern China is encountering in this, the 2560th anniversary of the Sage's birth. "It's natural for people [to] turn to the philosophy of Confucius, whose ideas about harmony more than 2,000 years ago can be solutions to many of today's problems" (qtd. in Mu). Dr. Gao remarked that as the West tends to look forward, China looks back at her history to learn how to avoid problems. The US's tendency is to blame China when we can, but Confucius taught that blame should begin with an examination of the self. It remains to be seen if China will profit from past mistakes in order to avoid future ones. Some experts do not see much self-reflection going on at the upper levels of power at present, consistent with a strong authoritarian government.

The mouthpiece of the Chinese government, *China Daily*, makes a case for Confucius's relevance in commerce today. The *Daily's* journalist You Nuo writes, "Confucianism is something very Chinese and irreplaceable in this society...it is the main part of this society's moral tradition, or how people tell right from wrong." You argues that Confucian ethics provide a common ground on how people should conduct business because "it is the main part of this society's moral tradition, or how people tell right from wrong." You admits the Chinese economy is in enormous transition now, but "When the rule of law is weak, and many rules that were made in the era of the planned economy are obsolete, a return to traditional teachings is a natural choice for many people." I wonder what ethical teachings handed down from our forebears could rescue Americans now.

Would that our Wall Street scoundrels made fearless self-inventories when they put greed before honor, which Confucianism instructs.

Guardian writer Daniel Bell maintains that a Confucian ethos still permeates ordinary life in China, especially as it concerns the family. A central tenet of Confucianism was filial piety. The law obliges adult children to support their aging parents. In his book *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Bell discusses how children in his son's primary school are evaluated according to how well they show filial piety towards parents. Bell goes on to say that criminals take advantage of this filial piety; during the Chinese New Year when by tradition children bring gifts to their parents, the crime rate rises sharply. The relationship between children and elderly parents is often the center of Chinese soap opera plots. Prostitutes tell their clients that money they earn goes back home to assist their old parents (Bell, "From Marx to Confucius"). Dr. Gao paid for her younger brother's education all the way through his Ph.D. As the oldest child as well as the first graduate, her family expected her to. There exists a subtext in this example: as a daughter her level of education should not exceed a son's, a dark legacy of Confucius. Filial piety extends to teachers, too. When I asked a teacher in China if she had any discipline problems with students, she thought for a moment and said, "Only when one falls asleep in the back." Daniel Bell cites the example of a colleague from City University of Hong Kong who found that gay literature in China focuses on the relationship between child and parents, not between partner to partner as in the West ("From Marx to Confucius"). Everywhere I saw mothers or fathers on bicycles with a child on board. At stop lights and parks, I noted how affectionate parents were with their children.

China's leaders have given their full endorsement of the Sage of Qufu. "Confucius said, 'Harmony is something to be cherished,'" intoned President Hu Jintao in February 2005, followed two years later by Premier Wen Jiabao's approving comment: "From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen the traditional culture of the Chinese nation has numerous precious elements [like] community, harmony among different viewpoints, and sharing the world in common" (qtd. in Ash). Daniel Bell joked that the Communist Party might have to change its name to the Chinese Confucian Party (Ash). Xiang Shiling of Renmin University believes that Confucian precepts of harmony and integration are the core reason for the One Country, Two System's success. From what I could see, the openness and freedom I saw in Hong Kong in February 1969 was still apparent in July 2009. Macao goes on with business as usual since it was turned over to the PRC. Gao Wenqian, a researcher at the CPC Central Party Literature Research Center, believes the Confucian principles of unity and harmony are so deeply ingrained, that "The concept of "great unity" (*da yi tong*)...is actually at work in the innermost part of Chinese people. [China] must be big, it must be united, and only in this way can the country become great."

Embedded in Confucian philosophy is an almost absolute authoritarianism in which the ruler is the pinnacle of the power hierarchy. Perhaps Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao discovered certain advantages in Confucianism that Mao ignored when he reviled Confucius. With its emphasis on allegiance upward from peasant to emperor, Confucianism has left the Chinese people with a strong proclivity to accept authoritarian leadership in their government. Mao, The Great Helmsman, did not oppose his glorification as a modern emperor, but Hu and Wen have exploited their country's

journey into the uncertain seas of modernization, affixing Confucius as the ship of state's figurehead. Kang Xiao Guang, Professor of Regional Economics and Politics at Renmin University of China, argues that a good government looks after the country as a whole, not sectarian interests. It stresses the importance of harmony over conflict. Thus, he concludes, China veers more to a one-party system and therefore a more authoritarian government than the West (Shi Tianjian). Shi Tianjian believes the result is a greater dependence on the government with fewer predispositions to dissent. Thus the ingrained Confucian precepts allow stability during immense change, food for spiritual and cultural longing, and a comforting familiarity with concepts long woven into the cultural fabric. If this strange hybrid of capitalism, communism, and Confucianism works, it can provide a role model for developing countries as an alternative to Western democracy.

Developing countries are not alone in assessing the advantages of Confucianism. Schools Minister of England Jim Knight has radically proposed the secondary schools incorporate Confucius in their course of studies. "There is a lot we can learn from the Chinese culture and Confucius," he said. "Confucius said that, alongside knowledge, you should have time to think...It is not just about acquisition of knowledge, but about respect for the importance of education and the family, and that is something I would love to see engendered in our culture as well as it is in China" (qtd. in Crace). Besides improving test scores, Knight believes a syllabus heavy in Confucianism would provide a remedy for the West's declining respect for family and education. Knight may be on to a profound epiphany. After spending a month in this magnificent culture and studying Confucius in more depth, I am taking a hard look at my own core values. In speeches I derive from this project as well as in my classroom, I will use Confucius's teachings as

one of several models when I discuss ethics. Like China, the US is also wading into an uncertain future, feeling the stones one at a time. Jim Knight may not be alone in recommending our school curriculums should integrate lessons on the noble ideals of Confucianism. It makes sense because “We would not merely learn something about the Chinese. We might even learn something about ourselves” (Ash).

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