

Confucian Culture and Contemporary China - a Compatibility Issue

Roxana RÎBU ¹

After the fall of Qing dynasty, together with the beaurocratic system that made reform impossible, Confucianist tradition came under scrutiny, with many intellectuals voicing the need to get rid of its harnesses, guilty of keeping China locked in the „feudal” past. The urgent need for modernization refered both to technology and thinking, and was synonymous to Westernization. Come the proclamation of the People’s Republic, Confucius was blended with the dregs of the past. The Cultural Revolution saw everything Confucian smashed to pieces while after Lin Biao’s defection it was associated with treason itself. After 1976, however, Confucian tradition came to be seen, more and more, as a central part of national identity and in urgent need for re-evaluation. As opposed to other imported ways of thought, Confucianism already had Chinese characteristics. Within my paper I make a summarization of the efforts at making Confucian culture compatible with the new ways of Chinese thinking.

Keywords: *New Confucianism, traditional values, National studies, Cultural fever, reevaluation*

1. Introduction

Confucianism, as a set of social and moral values, and Confucius, as a personality and symbol, make up a very complex structure that has shaped the Chinese civilization.

On the one hand, there is the Confucian teaching, concerned with the mechanisms of a perfectible society, in which Rites, education and humanity prevail, which operates on the principle of self-improvement for the good of the community, the ideal which is represented by the respectful and affectionate

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, roxana-alina.ribu@unitbv.ro

relationship between the dedicated sovereign and his loyal subjects. On the other hand, there is the historical character, hero and antihero, depending on the era, exponent of an order that has acquired, over the centuries, various characteristics and interpretations. If Confucian teaching, taken from Confucius as a historical synthesis and developed by heirs who were either more idealistic or more realistic, more reformist or more conservative, became the prerogative of an elite of scholar-officials, the character of Confucius went through phases either of veneration or of popular boycott, as a useful effigy of militants from various camps.

2. Confucianism since the end of the Qing dynasty to the end of the Mao era

Looking only at the recent pages of Chinese history, from the end of the Qing dynasty to the beginning of the 21st century, we can see how Confucius and his ideas have gone through episodes of rise and fall, from adulation to persecution. In the face of the oppressive Christian foreign powers that came to highlight its own vulnerabilities, China adopted the program of 'Self-strengthening', at the end of which, in the set of reforms initiated by Kang Youwei, the author of the manifesto-book "Confucius the Reformer" (Kongzi Gaizhi Kao 孔子改制考, 1897), Confucianism was entrusted with the role of facilitating national cohesion, in a surge of nationalist-religious revival. Kang Youwei's reforms were drowned in blood, after a short period of one hundred days. A decade later, the Qing dynasty collapsed, along with China's imperial history and, why not, with the pressure of Confucian conservatism on the Chinese style of government. The years in which the Western world was writhing under the shadow of death, during the First World War, were also the years of the New Culture Movement, in China, in which the struggle of the emancipation with the crushing past reached its maximum levels. It was precisely the period when young intellectuals vehemently demanded a break from the past suffocated by Confucianism, through the phrase "Down with Confucius & sons" (Hu Shi apud Bresciani 2008, 14), through reformist ideas and the tendency towards Westernization at any cost.

The anti-Confucian stance of the phenomenon known as the May Fourth Movement, after its culmination in the student protests in Beijing during the Versailles peace negotiations of 1919, is all-encompassing, contaminating a wide variety of fields. The trend will lose momentum only with the realization of the destruction caused precisely by the inhumanity of the Great War in Europe, and the surge towards positivism, towards 'science and democracy' is tempered. Years of

negotiations follow, but also of shifting attention and energies towards confronting an instance of the nefarious character of modernization and Westernization, namely the conquering imperialist momentum gained by Japan.

With the failure of the Nationalists and the installation of the Communists in power under the guidance of Mao Zedong, the feudal past, the oppression of the landlords, and practically all the historical catastrophes, traditionally associated with the Confucian ideas of social obedience and respect for hierarchy, had to be wiped clean. It was time to take out a blank page on which to rewrite, from scratch, the history of China. The one who used to write poems with a brush, in a calligraphic style, declaring himself an admirer of the Confucian reformer Kang Youwei, was also the one who urged for continuous revolution, anarchy, student revolt against teachers and direct criticism against Confucius, put on the same level as the 'traitor Lin Biao'.

3. Revival of Confucianism

As China became increasingly isolated from the rest of the world, scholars organically attached to their own culture fought, outside China's borders, for the recognition of the positive values of Chinese culture and civilization marked by Confucianism. Thus, a group of self-exiled intellectuals, consisting of Xu Fuguan, Mou Zongsan, Zhang Junmai and Tang Junyi, wrote the essay entitled 為中國文化敬告世界人值宣言 - Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World, a manifesto associated with a movement that would bear the name New Confucianism. The promoters of reevaluated Confucianism do not cease, therefore, to represent their culture, this time in reverent dialogue with the civilizations of the world before which it felt misrepresented. The extended Sinic space, of "cultural China" everywhere, as Tu Weiming would call it in 1991, is the one in which Confucianism continues to be studied and expressed, in a compensatory formula for the total persecution it was just facing in mainland China. Mao's disappearance from the leadership of China followed by the Reform and Opening-up stage signals the opportunity to repatriate past Confucianism through international reevaluation. Starting with the end of the 1970s we witness the reaffirmation of the positive aspects of Confucianism associated with cultural roots, which would later evolve towards the 'Cultural fever'

(wenhuare 文化热) phase, in the 1980s, and 'National studies fever' (guoxuere 国学热), in the 1990s.

Practically, the formula of Reform and Opening proposed by Deng Xiaoping confronted two complementary attitudes: on the one hand, the effort of economic revival, which comes with competition and the mad race for profit ("why talk about profit?" 何必曰利? asked Mencius in 1A1) and on the other hand, the need to restore order and hierarchy of values, to re-integrate into one's own cultural tradition that could not be separated from Confucian tenets. Moral metaphysics had to somehow counterbalance economic pragmatism, just as spiritual satisfaction had to accompany satiety. In this sense, with the endorsement of the state leadership but still part of an intellectual leeway provided by the authorities, courses and lectures on Confucianism began to be organized in China, delivered by younger disciples of old New Confucians. In retrospect, the campaign to rediscover national essence must have had a practical political stake, alongside a cultural one, associated with an immediate need to rebuild national identity.

The acute awareness of the gap of economic development, compared to the West, appears as an immediate effect of the launch of the opening policy. The contrast felt by the intellectual elite in China, faced with the Western world, must have brought an inferiority complex similar to that of the Opium Wars. The question therefore arose of the imperative of modernization at the same time as that of preserving the cultural identity that already constituted a valuable treasure trove. The declared objective of the Four Modernizations translated into imitating the Western model at the technological level. However, the same model could represent a serious threat to the national essence. This is the context in which Confucian ideas, already passed through the academic analysis of Western researchers but also through the successful managerial exercise of Southeast Asian dragons, are assumed by the Chinese intelligentsia as a dressing formula in the renewed dialogue with the world at large.

Thus, under the broader aegis of the need to redefine modernity, China's cultural tradition closely associated with the *Ru* 儒 school urgently needed to be rediscovered and redefined. Confucius' name had already appeared in the press in 1978, as a seal of the catastrophic failure of the Cultural Revolution - suddenly, not as an expression of the feudal past but as an exponent of traditional Chinese culture that needed to be reassessed in the new context. This complex process of reassessment required a wide campaign of studies and research, especially since the available tools were more closely related to the Marxist scientific vision. In this

framework, the already practiced discourses of the New Confucianists in the diaspora fit quite well, which is why they were invited to lecture in mainland China.

In 1985, institutions such as the Chinese Confucius Research Institute (Zhonghua Kongzi yanjiu zhushi hui she 中华孔子研究株式会社) were established, whose director was the renowned Confucian scholar Zhang Dainian (Song 2003, 85), as well as the Academy of Chinese Culture (Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan 中国文化书院), which formulated its mission to research Chinese culture, but especially Confucian thought. This modern enlightenment movement falls within the cultural fever of the 1980s, materializing through a wide series of publications and conferences, and Tu Weiming's delivering lectures at the Beijing University in 1985 will be considered a moment of reference for the repatriation of the new Confucianism.

The purpose of re-evaluating Confucianism in the context of redefining the national cultural essence involved revealing its fundamental values while simultaneously eliminating the elements that would be subject of criticism. Therefore, reorienting the discourse in a positive direction, highlighting the coincidence of Confucian thought with traditional culture and the destiny of the nation, creates the premises for a reassumption of this thought. Confucius himself went through successive stages of exaltation, reaching the end of the 1980s when he got to be represented as “the great thinker, educationist, statesman, philosopher and historian” (apud Song 2003, 86)

As China's economic development progresses, dialogue with world cultures takes on new meanings. In this context, the teachings of Confucius are attributed a universal value, as a contribution of Chinese civilization to the progress of humanity in general. Thus, at the international conference organized in August 1987 in Confucius's birthplace, namely in Qufu, the Vice-Premier of the State Council Gu Mu, as honorary chairman of the Confucius Foundation, declared Confucianism as “one of the crystallizations of national Chinese culture”. (apud Song 2003, 87)

Thus, we can see how, from being a blasphemous symbol of the feudal past, of the oppressive class, Confucius becomes an element of national pride, part of the treasury of all humanity², bringing China into the position of a full partner in the international cultural concert. On this occasion, the positive aspects of Confucian thought are revealed, such as the emphasis on harmony (he 和), or

² In 1948, Peng-chun Chang, as a Vice-Chair of the Human Rights Commission with the United Nations, representing China, had managed to integrate Confucian cardinal principles into the Declaration's framework.

respect (jing 敬), both between people and between people and nature, which have the capacity to contribute to the achievement of a harmonious and balanced existence at a global level. Furthermore, the campaign to universalize the cardinal Confucian virtues has led, in certain situations, even to the circumvention of their consecrated names. For example, Tu Weiming in his Lectures in Xi'an, 2016, affirms the equality of non-Western spiritual principles with those which shaped the spirituality of the Age of Reason in the West.

To sum up, according to Wang Ruichang and Fan Ruiping (2019, 4) there are three groups of scholars who deal with Confucianism in recent China: the group that criticizes and rejects Confucianism from the Marxist perspective; the group displaying a kind of sympathetic and respectful attitude; the group that embraces fundamental Confucian principles, spiritual concerns, commitment to Confucian values, a group consisting of genuine present-day followers of Confucius, like Lou Yijun - Shanghai, disciple of Mou Zongsan; Deng Xiaojun, Beijing, disciple of Cao Mufan (disciple of Xiong Shili and Liang Shuming) and who argues that Confucianism should incorporate democracy; Yang Zibin, Lanzhou, who expressed commitment and helped to magnify the scope of the Confucian discourse in contemporary China.

To them, we can also add Jiang Qing, who, in his article published in Ehu Monthly, 1989, calls for reviving Confucianism in the mainland, substituting Confucianism for Marxism as state religion, with a mainstream cultural status, underscoring solidarity and a strong cultural and moral fiber.

At the same time, it can be observed how the increasingly intense promotion of Chinese culture marked by Confucian values is not limited to the academic world but is also assumed by the political leadership. This aspect is confirmed both by the endorsement given by institutions and personalities in the high echelons of state leadership and by cultural diplomacy campaigns culminating in the establishment of hundreds of Confucius Institutes at universities around the world.

4. Appealing to Confucianism

Beyond its universal character and its connecting role in the world dialogue, the fact that the revival of Confucianism and the identification of its compatibility with modernization was assumed at the level of state leadership can be linked to its ability to facilitate smooth governance.

Reintroducing the Confucian teaching of 'pacifying the country, stabilizing society, and regulating the people' seemed to coincide with the government's policy of promoting stability and unity, and building the Four Modernizations, while highlighting the positive side of Confucianism - both historical and the present (e.g. the Singaporean practice of Confucian capitalism - as the national essence also appeared to converge with Deng Xiaoping's calling for 'socialism with Chinese characteristics.' (Song 2003, 91).

A proper renaissance of Confucianism could be witnessed starting with the end of the 1990's, especially owing to the efforts of the group of scholars committed to Confucian values, disciples of the New Confucians from abroad, aware of their mission to „carry on the interconnected thread of the Way” or *daotong* 道统 (Makeham 2008, 50), concerned with moral metaphysics and open to dialogue with Western liberal views. It was members of this group that would establish research teams, academies, even part-time or full-time schools for reading the Classics, which would, at some point, like in 2004, be attended by millions of Chinese children (Wang & Fan 2019, 12). Actually this Classics Reading phenomenon expanded from private educational institutions to state universities and schools, to publishing houses which edited works like The Four Books, The Three Character Book, The Thousand Character Book, Disciplinary Instructions for Children or Three Hundred Poems by Tang Poets, to courses and recitation intervals in companies and even to TV series like that of Yu Dan's, followed by her best seller - *Confucius for the heart*, in 2006.

This is to say that the concern and re-valuation of Confucius and his ideas managed to cross the stream from the academia to the society at large, given its better access to education and also to information via the internet. Many websites, newsletters, forums, summer camps, worshipping ceremonies were established and performed by so called “Confucian zealots” in China, like Duan Yanping and Wang Dasan, especially at the beginning of the 2010's (Wang and Fan 2019, 15).

Regarding the relevance of Confucian ideas for the Chinese society, an interesting point is made by professor He Guimei who renders various traditional practices as "unconscious actions" with a moral value, referring to those social practices regularly performed, in everyday life, by people without conscious reflection. In her book titled "China retold - self-awareness of civilization and the research on ideology and culture in the 21st century" - 2023, professor He Guimei argues that many traditional practices have unconsciously become everyday habits,

so she signals the need for people to become aware of their own cultural traits, to reinterpret the core values and to make them relevant for the contemporary world. This kind of awareness would also contribute to an up-to-date interpretation of these practices but also an adequacy of the traditions to their contemporary relevance. Moreover, China's ascension on the global stage makes this call for cultural self-awareness even more urgent, considering that the look from outside and contemplation from inside bring to the fore the most exquisite moral values.

Some of the values associated with Confucius are present in official discourses but most of all Confucius is silently present in the way of life of the Chinese people, in their pursuit for a higher education, in their compassion in times of need, in their concern for their families as well as for the community. A Chinese friend told me recently, with an appropriate amount of Confucian modesty, that their generation knows only a little bit about Confucius, as they used to memorize some of his sayings during classes in primary school, that their knowledge of Confucius cannot compare to that of the Western sinologists... And yet we can plainly see that those sayings have definitely achieved their effect as, many years later, that friend is an accomplished professor, presenting the Chinese civilization to people all over the world.

One of the most important ideals for parents all over China is to make sure their children graduate from a good school, get into a good university, get a job in a state institution and have a family - in other words, become a scholar-official, worthy of their ancestors and carrying on their family line. Parents also teach their sons and daughters to be concerned with things which are worthy of the time spent and not to waste their energy on unworthy goals. And yet, at least since the pandemics, there are many young people dissatisfied with their jobs, who prefer to "lay flat" - *tangping* 躺平 and live by minimalist precepts, who are reluctant to marriage and having children, seeming more concerned with individual satisfaction. Isn't this atmosphere similar to that at the end of the Han dynasty?

5. Confucianism and the world

As instances of popular culture, especially aimed at the audience around the world, let us remember the memorable Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing which featured many references to Confucius and his ideas, while the movie *Confucius*, released in 2010, could be seen in many theaters outside of China. The main actor, Chow Yun-fat, playing the role of Confucius, became a model for the

Master's iconography. As for the books about Confucius enlisted to be translated into foreign languages, thus bearing the vetting of China Publishing Group, we can mention titles like "Confucius Wisdom – learn to be a world class leader", by Caspar Shih, published in Romania in 2019. International events such as that of the International Confucius Association or the one marking Confucius' 2575th birth anniversary, in 2024, are also instances of making Confucius an item of global interest.

Worth mentioning is also the phenomenon known as "Boston Confucianism" which refers to a group of scholars at Boston University where, along with Tu Weiming himself, there were Christian theologians like John Berthrong and Robert C. Neville. These scholars called themselves New Confucians, they advocated for a 'multiple religious and cultural identity' (Neville 2000, 193) and were actively involved in the study and practice of Confucianism outside China.

In conclusion, Confucianism could never cease being relevant for the Chinese people, be they scholar-officials or young graduates, that the core values which are listed in plain sight on every Chinese boulevard also refer to basic tenets that Confucius himself advocated for and that as long as the family, the community and the country get stronger, it will be those Confucian values that will hold them together.

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