

Hot Topics**Confucianism and the Intellectual Elite of Modern China**

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Over the past century, the intellectual climate in China has been extremely unpredictable. This may sound like a banal observation, and so it is, as the same could be said of the Soviet Union, Europe, the United States, India, etc. One hundred years of extreme fluctuations in the global intellectual climate have affected all parts of the globe, so when we consider the intellectual changes that have taken place in China, we have to take into consideration the meanderings and erratic course of our own intellectual traditions during the same period.

In the early 1900s, China's intellectual elite was under the massive influence of European and North American traditions in politics, philosophy, religion, literature and science, and a considerable proportion of Chinese scholars were more than willing to scrap what they called 'the Confucian antique shop' in favour of 'Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy(赛先生与德先生)'. This attitude became synonymous with the New Cultural Movement (*xin wenhua yundong*: 新文化运动) or the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四运动), as it became known after the student demonstrations in front of the Tiananmen Gate on May 4, 1919 against the Versailles Treaty transfer of former German semi-colonial possessions in Shandong Province to Japan. The prevailing narrative of the dilemma facing Chinese intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s insists on a dichotomy between Chinese and Western thinking, between tradition and modernity.

In reality, the choice was not that simple. First, tradition and modernity are not unambiguous concepts, and second, they are not necessarily incompatible. Although Confucianism may have perished as a political viability together with the imperial institution of the Qing Dynasty, none of the political isms of the West seemed more obvious than others as a foundation for the young republic. As mentioned above, there were many supporters of democracy in one form or another, but as hunger disasters and warlords increasingly ravaged the country in the 1920s and 1930s, ideas and systems inspired by Stalin (1878-1953) and Mussolini (1883-1945) won the day. The same thing happened in Europe.

But beneath this polarized surface, a layer of growth existed; one which both sustained continuity and promoted the changes that epitomize the intellectual debate in China today. The veterans of the failed 'Hundred-day Reform' of 1898 (*bairi weixin* 百日维新), Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929), together with the first major translator of Western ideas, Yan Fu (1854-1921), constituted a vigorous root system of this growth layer. All three had acquired a thorough knowledge of the West during their sojourns abroad; Yan had studied at the British Naval Academy, while Kang and Liang had traveled in most of the western world and were forced into exile in Japan for a number of years. In Japan they became acquainted with the results of the comprehensive reforms introduced under the Meiji Emperor in 1868 to attract Western knowledge, develop the economy and strengthen nationalism.

The three men also shared an in-depth knowledge of the classical Chinese tradition, which not only influenced their understanding and interpretations of the Western thinkers they studied, but also guided their own visions of China's future. Kang was arguably more entrenched in tradition

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than Liang and Yan. His idea of a utopian world community was based on a semi-religious notion of Confucius (Kongzi, trad. 551-479 BCE) and esoteric interpretations of two-thousand-year-old texts. Nevertheless, his visions also contained elements of economic equality, individual freedom, democracy, elimination of racial and gender discrimination, and the abolition of traditional family structures. All elements that were too radical for his contemporaries—not only in China. Kang outlined in detail his controversial ideas in *The Book of Great Unity* (*Da tong shu* 大同书), which was first published in 1935, eight years after his death. It is interesting to note that parts of Kang's terminology have resurfaced in recent years.

Yan Fu was a warm advocate of Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) Social Darwinism, which he somewhat strangely attempted to promote by translating Thomas Henry Huxley's (1825-95) *Evolution and Ethics* (1893) and by arguing against the ethical restrictions Huxley presents. Yan sought to promote economic and political liberalism and democracy. He was clearly critical of the more intuitive aspects of Confucianism, which did not, however, prevent him from relying on a speculative cosmology derived from Daoism and Buddhism.

Liang Qichao, too, was strongly influenced by Social Darwinism and perhaps the most significant of the early critics of Chinese traditionalism. Liang's work focused on the establishment of a Chinese state (nation) based on a people whose freedom, equality and rights (or perhaps 'power', *quanli* 权力) were guaranteed by laws. Still, he never completely liberated himself from tradition. Liang's concept of equality, for example, was based on the metaphysical notions of the human nature by the Confucian philosopher Mencius (Mengzi, 4th century BCE). Another traditional Confucian ideal that Liang entertained was the idea of the individual's self-upbringing or self-cultivation. In his younger years, Mao Zedong took an interest in Liang's thoughts and ideas.

Thus, the first decades of the Republic were marked by great enthusiasm for new ideas whether they were conveyed through Japan (with the relatively newly-established capital of Tokyo as the intellectual power center) or came directly from the United States and Europe. But as outlined above, it was not a total rejection of China's heritage, rather a fruitful dialogue, and a few prominent Chinese philosophers, Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Feng Youlan (1895-1990), attempted to bring Chinese philosophy up to speed with Western philosophy by situating it in a Western philosophical and historical framework. Hu was educated at Cornell and Columbia (under John Dewey, 1859-1952) and served from 1917 to 1937 as a professor of Chinese and Western philosophy at the National University of Beijing, where he introduced the application of critical science theory and methodology. At the same time, he cautioned against uncritical importation of Western ideas and isms, believing that a systematization of the Chinese tradition, including a reevaluation of the dominant position of Confucianism, would bring endless resources to light.

Feng Youlan, who had also studied at Columbia under Dewey, is best known in the West for his two-volume history of Chinese philosophy (1931 and 1934), which was published in English in Derk Boddes's (1909-2003) translation in 1952-53. In his own philosophical work, Feng focused on philosophical debates from the Song (960-1127) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties, more specifically deliberations on metaphysical principles (*li*). He attempted to combine various traditional Chinese schools of thought with methodological theories of ancient Greek philosophers and Hegelian dialectics. Throughout his life, Feng revised his history of Chinese philosophy, and perhaps initially inspired by his interest in Hegelian dialectics, Feng embarked on a new

seven-volume history of philosophy in 1980 in which he analyzed the Chinese tradition from a dialectical Marxist and Maoist point of view. The last volume written shortly before his death but not published until 2000 contained some criticism of Mao. Previously, in a revised edition published in 1962, Feng had compared Mao to Confucius and himself to Confucius' favorite Yan Hui (trad. 521-490 BCE).

Like in most other parts of the world in the early 1900s, intellectuals in China also had disagreements about interpretations of Marx and Engels. However, there was also the more fundamental problem of translation and understanding the terminology of western philosophical concepts. In a manner similar to the adaptation and transformation of Buddhism during succeeding dynasties, the concept of dialectics, for example, also underwent a transformation on Chinese soil. In his book *Chinese Dialectics: From Yijing to Marxism* (2005), Tian Chenshan (b. 1946) convincingly argues that Mao's understanding of dialectics and Marxism was influenced by traditional Chinese concepts. Chen draws attention to Qu Qiubai (1899-1935) and Ai Siqi (1910-1966) as the chief systematizer and leading popularizer, respectively, of Marxism in China, and he demonstrates how Ai's understanding of Marxist dialectics in particular affected Mao, whose knowledge of Marxism mainly came from reading Chinese translations of Russian language works. Mark Borisovich Mitin (1901-87), who is a relatively unknown Stalinist philosopher in the West, played an important role in Ai's interpretation of dialectical materialism. Ai, who translated several of Mitin's works into Chinese, was also a diligent writer himself, and it is well documented that Mao read Ai's *Zhexue yu shenghuo* ('Philosophy and Life': 哲学与生活) from 1936 with great interest.

In his translations of Marxist literature from Russian, English and German, Ai often relied on pre-existing Japanese translations and adopted the terminology from there. Japanese translators of western works had borrowed Chinese characters from the classical Chinese tradition to translate terms such as, for example, 'dialectics', and these new translations using classical Chinese were reclaimed, so to speak, by Ai and other Chinese translators. This had already happened in the 19th century with such basic western concepts as 'religion' and 'philosophy', concepts that did not exist in the Japanese or Chinese traditions. 'Dialectics' was thus translated into Chinese as '*bianzhengfa*' (辩证法: composed of three characters, which in classical Chinese were three separate words). While the last word in this context simply means 'method', the two words (or characters) '*bianzheng*' have a long history as a binomen in classical Chinese thinking. Here it is intimately associated with correlative thinking and a cosmological worldview that is unknown in Marxism and foreign to European philosophy in general. Based on the classical Chinese work *Yijing* (易经: *The Book of Changes*), Chen characterizes this line of thinking as *tongbian*, which may be translated as 'development (or continuity) through alternation (interaction)'. In this line of thinking, concepts such as transcendence and dualism are unfamiliar, while complementation, continuity and polarity are predominant.

Many sinologists, political scientists, historians, and others who have studied Mao have noted his unorthodox approach to Marxism. A few have acknowledged that Mao was strongly influenced by the tradition he apparently attempted to break with, and even fewer have realized that many aspects of Maoism have more in common with Confucianism than they have with European versions of Marxism. An analysis of Mao's works clearly shows that he also sought inspiration in the classical traditions, and both his mindset and terminology are to some extent rooted in readings of more than two thousand-year-old Chinese texts such as *Laozi*, *Yijing*, *Mozi*, *Hanfeizi* as well as

later philosophers, for example Zhang Zai (1020-77). This is confirmed by Chen Jin in his edited volume on Mao Zedong's reading habits, *Mao Zedong dushu biji* (毛泽东读书笔记: 1996).

As a side effect of Deng Xiaoping's (1904-97) 'reforms and openness' (改革开放: *gaige kaifang*), which has led to China's position as the second largest economy in the world today, Maoism (and Marxism) as a philosophy gradually lost its central position among intellectuals in China. This resulted in an ideological void, as it were, that various groups in society sought to fill in different ways under changing political circumstances. The economic development has largely run smoothly, but ideological debates among party members, intellectuals (artists, authors), the *nouveau riche*, and members of the ever-growing middle class have changed focus from time to time. While attempting to expand their spheres of influence, the debating parties have often had shared interests, and the climate over the past decades has mostly been much milder than is generally evident from stories in the western press (which often reports on individual cases). One of the most conspicuous features of post-Mao China is the return of traditions throughout society. Whereas Daoism and Buddhism mainly appeal to the general public, large parts of the intellectual elite have turned their attention to Confucianism. This is evidenced in some of China's foreign policy strategies, the so-called soft power strategy, which has resulted in the establishment of hundreds of Confucius Institutes (孔子学院: *Kongzi xueyuan*) all over the world. Like *Goethe-Institutten* and *Alliance Française*, for example, which operate as cultural embassies for Germany and France, the Confucius Institutes are supposed to extend the world's knowledge of Chinese language and culture.

The revival of Confucianism, which has been declared dead several times during the 20th century, has not been entirely unproblematic. Confucianism understood as a set of values which emphasize diligence, moral responsibility, education, commitment to the family and adaptation to a hierarchically structured society has characterized China and her neighbours for more than two thousand years. This is a value system that authorities and governments would want to introduce and promote to people who are actively involved in politics. Confucianism as philosophy and political ideology has been reinvented many times before in China's history, and the revival of Confucianism at the end of the 20th century also necessitated a new narrative of transmission establishing an orthodoxy to prevent it from appearing as a return to the antique shop that had previously been rejected.

The main exponents of the new Confucianism (*xin rujia*), who are often divided into three generations (the first generation from 1921 to the establishment of The People's Republic in 1949, the second generation up to the new opening in 1979, and the third from 1980 to the present), may be listed as follows: Feng Youlan, Xiong Shili (1885-1968) and his students Tang Junyi (1909-78), Xu Fuguang (1903-82) and Mou Zongsan (1909-95). Fang Dongmei (1899-1977) and his students of the third generation, Cheng Zhongying (b. 1935) and Liu Shuxian (b. 1934), as well as Mou's student Du Weiming (b. 1940). Nearly every one of these philosophers have spent most or all of their lives outside of Mainland China, while a fourth generation raised and educated in China with experience from American and/or European universities may be emerging, for example, Chen Lai (b. 1952) and Yang Qingzhong (b. 1964).

Historically, Confucianism as a philosophy has undergone tremendous changes during the 2500 years since Confucius' death, but the objective and rationale have always been the same: a peaceful and harmonious society and the moral upbringing of the individual based on

self-cultivation and imitation of role models. The sage and the king/ruler were the inner and outer manifestations, respectively, of this notion. The wisdom gained should be realized externally in a morally responsible participation in social and political life. Educated and talented individuals thus could form part of a bureaucracy and a government, which could be characterized as a meritocracy. The new Confucian philosophers sought inspiration in several places: The starting point would often be the philosophers of the Song and Ming dynasties, especially Lu Jiuyuan (also known as Xiangshan, 1139-93) and Wang Shouren (also known as Yangming, 1472–1529), both of whom focused on the refinement of the mind and the practical application of wisdom. Many of the new Confucian philosophers are also deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy, and they are all proficient in the *Yijing*'s philosophy of changes which emphasizes processes over substances. Against this background, the new Confucians have attempted to integrate elements of European philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941). Generally speaking, there is a great interest in comparative philosophy among China's contemporary philosophers, and there is a very strong belief that the Chinese tradition can make a significant—although not yet recognized—contribution to global society.

In recent decades, the Chinese government has participated in promoting Confucianism by creating forums (like the present one) for intellectuals as well as by introducing Confucian ethics in society as whole. Confucianism is once again becoming a living tradition. Many intellectuals feel a commitment to Confucian ideas and their implementation in Chinese society, which at times endows Confucianism with religious, patriotic or nationalist dimensions. In line with this, the Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao (b. 1942) formulated the visions of a harmonious society (和谐社会: *hexie shehui*) and the so-called socialist eight praises and eight disgraces (八荣八耻: *ba rong ba chi*). It is, for example, commendable to stand together and help one another, to be honest and reliable, while it is a disgrace to profit at the expense of others and to set profits higher than morals. The last principle stems from the aforementioned influential Confucian philosopher Mencius.

A lecture series on Confucius on China's National CCTV in 2006 by a professor from Beijing Normal University (Beijing Shifan Daxue), Yu Dan (b. 1965), was published later that year as the book "*Lunyu*" *xinde* (论语心得) and became a rare media event with people queuing for hours in front of the bookstores to obtain a copy. (The book sold millions of copies and had by February 2008 been reprinted 28 times. The first edition of her next book on the same subject was published in March 2008 and immediately sold 1.2 million copies). Yu Dan's books on Confucianism emphasize morality and finding peace within oneself rather than reckless pursuit of profit, and two important reasons for her success are, of course, the ideological void mentioned above and increasing economic and social inequality. While Yu Dan's reading of Confucius in a sense depoliticizes and individualizes societal problems, Confucianism also appears in heavily politicized interpretations. For example, Jiang Qing (b. c. 1953) who promotes Confucianism as a state ideology incompatible with Western values and ideas, such as liberalism, democracy and Marxism (Like many first-generation New Confucians, Jiang studied existentialism, Daoism, and Buddhism before focusing on Confucianism. In 2001, he opened a private school teaching Confucianism in Guizhou in southwestern China). Ultimately, the arguments in these debates hinge on how democracy and Confucianism are defined.

Over the last century or so, China has been an ideological and philosophical battlefield where intellectuals were involved in fierce debates and attempted to influence the powers of the time, sometimes at the risk of their lives (several leading figures of the The Hundred Days' Reform in 1898 were executed by the Qing authorities). Modern Chinese thinkers from Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao over Mao to 21st century philosophers and political theorists have been and are—in keeping with a more than two-millennial Chinese tradition—more concerned with practical solutions and politics than with theoretical system building. The responsibilities of the intellectual elite weigh heavily in China; in traditional China, this responsibility meant supporting good emperors and criticizing the bad, but often also with a pronounced tendency to keep an eye on their own positions in society. Contemporary China's intellectual elite does not uniformly support Confucianism, and even among those intellectuals who do, there are, of course, many different points of views regarding the role of Confucianism in China in the 21st century.