

Participants in the New Culture movement, including a young Mao Zedong and the great Chinese writer Zhou Shuren (Chou Hsu-ren) (1881–1936), who published under the pen name Lu Xun (Lu Hsün), wrote scathingly about how Confucius had shaped a China in which age was venerated at the expense of youth, women were repressed, individualism and creativity were stifled, and a cult of tradition prevented innovation. To join the modern world, they argued, China needed to jettison Confucius and everything that he represented, embracing the best that the West had to offer as, they claimed, Japan had done—resulting in its rising in global influence. They also insisted that intellectuals stop using classical Chinese, which was far removed from vernacular forms of communication, and develop a “plain speech” (*baihua*) form of writing to take its place.

Some, but not all, New Culture veterans would stick to anti-Confucian positions for decades. Others, though, would eventually abandon these, after throwing their lot in with the Nationalist Party, which began as a culturally radical group but later became a culturally conservative organization.

The Nationalists of the 1930s, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), would, in fact, be responsible for a major Confucian revival. Chiang insisted that China’s best route forward was to find a way to combine Confucian values with the most advanced technologies available in and best ideas coming from Japan and the West. Despite being a Christian, Chiang elevated the Chinese sage’s birthday to the status of a state holiday. He argued that the emphasis on tradition, family, social order, and clearly delineated hierarchies in Confucianism could go hand in hand with the teachings of the Bible.

Is Confucianism a religion?

Confucius himself was more of a philosopher than a religious figure. Even though his emphasis on looking up to elders fit in well with the practices of ancestor worship, which predated his time and remained a mainstay of Chinese rural and

sometimes thought of as simply a part of the Daoist creed but was at other points viewed as its own school of thought.

Confucian ideals and practices were extolled by most successive dynasties, though they were often, as in the Han period, braided together with concepts and rituals taken from other creeds. These included Daoism (always a presence) and Chinese folk religious traditions. In addition, Confucianism was eventually influenced greatly by ideas associated with the imported but quickly domesticated belief system of Buddhism, which reached an early point of high influence in China during the Tang (T’ang) Dynasty (618–907), a cosmopolitan era when many ideas and objects flowed in through overland trade routes such as the Silk Road. Buddhist concepts were crucial in contributing to modifications within the Confucian tradition during the Song (Sung) Dynasty (960–1279) that were so great that the term “neo-Confucianism” is used to describe them.

How was Confucius viewed a century ago?

An important dip in Confucius’s fortunes came in the early 1900s. Many Chinese intellectuals of the time argued that an attachment to “Confucian” values was responsible for the country’s decline. They blamed Confucius for China’s position of backwardness vis-à-vis the West and Japan, a formerly Confucian country that had begun to embrace European and American ways in the mid-19th century.

The most important pre-1949 anti-Confucian upsurge occurred during the New Culture movement (1915–1923). This was an iconoclastic struggle that one leader, Hu Shi (Hu Shih) (1891–1962), a student of the American philosopher John Dewey, would describe as “the Chinese Renaissance” in a book by that title based on lectures he gave in Chicago in the 1930s. The Chinese Renaissance also had things in common with the Enlightenment (its radical questioning of tradition and prizing of rationality) and the Western counterculture movement of the 1960s (its celebration of the value of youth, for example, and its celebration of new forms of art and literature).⁶

sometimes also court life for many centuries after his death, he claimed that it was so hard to understand the affairs of human beings that he was in no position to speculate about the details of the afterlife.

Nevertheless, throughout history, he has occasionally been elevated to the status of a saint or a godlike figure, with temples being devoted to him (including some that have recently been spruced up by the regime) and his hometown of Qufu being transformed into a pilgrimage site (with, lately, a bit of a theme-park aspect thrown in). Ironically, the period of rule by the Christian Chiang Kai-shek was a time in which Confucius was revered, as, even more ironically, is the current era of rule by the allegedly still atheist Communist Party.

Foreigners have often looked at China and said that the country has three major religions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Though Confucianism is more a philosophy than a religion, Daoism and Buddhism are indeed important systems of thought in China. Yet religious identity is also far more fluid than in the Judeo-Christian West, as many Chinese will move among the three depending on context. Someone, for example, might worship at a Confucian temple right before an important school exam (due to Confucius's association with learning) but also consider him- or herself a practicing Buddhist, adhering to a vegetarian diet and reciting sutras every morning. Buddhism, like all other religions, was suppressed during the Mao era, but it has enjoyed a popular revival in recent decades. Like Confucian temples, many Buddhist ones have also recently been renovated and, sometimes, turned into tourist destinations where people can observe "releasing life" ceremonies (live fish and birds are released into the wild), walk through a restored temple complex, have lunch at a vegetarian restaurant, and finish their visit with a trip to the gift shop.

How did Confucius fare after 1949?

Not surprisingly, when the Communist Party took power on October 1, 1949, after driving Chiang into exile on Taiwan, the

birthday of Confucius immediately ceased being celebrated. The anti-Confucius campaign of the early 1970s was just the most radical and focused expression of an anti-Confucian viewpoint that predominated throughout the Mao years and that continued during the brief post-Mao period, when China's paramount leader was Hua Guofeng (Hua Kuo-feng) (1921–2008), a kind of place-holder authority figure who was soon edged out of the top spot by Deng Xiaoping (Teng Hsiao-p'ing) (1904–1997) and spent the last decades of his life holding only relatively minor official posts.

The first decades of Communist rule were, moreover, a time when, contrary to Confucian ideals, egalitarian values were celebrated—though new forms of inequality took root, with cadres emerging as a class with special privileges. During this period, the government worked to minimize the importance of the family as a social unit by creating new communal units, such as collectives and communes. It was a time when China's leadership stressed adaptation to present conditions and creating a new future rather than celebrating any past golden age. It was also one of those rare times in Chinese history when Legalism was sometimes viewed in a positive way. This is because Mao, in typically iconoclastic fashion, sometimes said that when it came to China's various imperial rulers, the first emperor, with his Legalist ideas, disdain for book-learning detached from pragmatic concerns, and ability to get big things done, was among the best.

Why is Confucius back in favor?

The renewal of official veneration of Confucius, though representing an about-face for the Communist Party, is not that hard to understand. It fits in with a general tendency by the current regime to emphasize continuity with the past. Official statements are full of references to the country's glorious "5,000 years" of "unbroken" cultural development and references to China being the "only unified and continuous civilization" that still has a presence in the modern world.⁷ This assertion

is a problematic one, given how many changes over time there have been in the size and shape of China as a country and the values and traditions of the people living within its borders. Nevertheless, a mix-and-match approach to the past is now the order of the day, in which anything that suggests past greatness is held up as worthy of respect.

The image of China's present as carrying forward elements of its distant past is actively fostered via positive references to and celebrations of not just Confucius but also other people who lived during ancient times and symbols linked to very early periods of history. This is true even of sites that were seen as reminders of the failings rather than the glories of the past as recently as Mao's time. For example, Mao did not treat the Forbidden City as sacred. He was happy to allow the home of the emperors of China's last two dynasties, the Ming and the Qing (Ch'ing) (1644–1911), fall into disrepair, and during the Mao years, the grounds sometimes contained sculptures that drew attention to the unjust ways that ordinary Chinese were treated by rulers and landlords in the dark period that came before the Communist Revolution. Now, however, the old palace complex has been carefully restored and is presented as a symbol of the glamour and beauty—not decadence—of the past. The Forbidden City is a site that visiting dignitaries are supposed to tour, as President Obama did on his first trip to China in 2009, and view as representing the glories of the country's artistic and architectural traditions.

It is also telling that the old pattern of feeling a need to choose between celebrating the words of Confucius or the deeds of the first emperor has been abandoned. The Analects and the Terracotta Warriors are now treated as complementary symbols of an ancient China that achieved great things in many realms.

This promiscuous pairing of ancient icons often thought to represent contrasting traditions fits in with the desire of China's current leaders to cultivate national pride by presenting the country as one that was great in the past and has

become great again on their watch. This is partly because it is in the regime's interest for people of Chinese descent in Taiwan, Australia, the United States, and other parts of the world (even those with no love for Communism) to identify with, travel to, and invest in the PRC.

There is also a more specific reason that Confucius is back. This is because there is a good fit between the emphasis that Confucius and his followers have always placed on social harmony and the focus that Hu Jintao and other current Chinese leaders have placed on stability.

Mao, in keeping with Marxist tradition, stressed that progress is made via conflict and struggle. By contrast, though China's current leaders claim to still adhere to Marxism, there are strong—and intentional—Confucian resonances to the slogans championing cooperation in creating a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) that have become identified with Hu.

There was even a moment during the Olympics Opening Ceremony when the contours of this catchphrase's main character, “he” (harmony), were visually displayed in an eye-catching manner. And the list of fifty officially approved slogans for the large parade held on October 1, 2009, to mark the sixtieth birthday of the PRC included several with “hexie,” one of which called on the people to help the party “build a socialist harmonious society and promote social equity and justice.”

How exactly has the regime used Confucius in recent years?

In addition to sanctioning the sage's appearance during the Olympics and echoing the Analects and later Confucian texts in calls for “harmonious” social relations, since 2004, the Chinese government has sponsored the creation and funding of “Confucius Institutes” in many parts of the world. These are modeled in part on the German Goethe Institutes, and their stated intent is simply to further understanding of China's cultural legacy via things such as offering classes in

the Chinese language and courses on Chinese history that emphasize continuities with the past and the “5,000 years of Chinese civilization” idea. One key contrast with the Goethe Institutes and other comparable undertakings, though, is that, as Lionel Jensen stresses in a careful look at the topic, unlike their more independent German counterparts, Confucius Institutes are “largely underwritten by and must report to the Chinese government.”⁸

In the West, controversy has sometimes followed these Confucius Institutes. In the most extreme cases, commentators have suggested that they are part of a Chinese Communist plot to infiltrate American communities. Pointing to the fact that the money and personnel to staff the institutes come from a ministry within the PRC government, such alarmism harkens back to the “Red Scare” of the 1950s. There is also, though, a much more sensible basis for concern. Namely, some scholars worry that a university that has funding coming from an arm of the Beijing government could end up curtailing intellectual freedom on campus, perhaps in subtle ways. The Chinese authorities have used many kinds of pressure—for example, to try to get officials around the world to refrain from meeting publicly with the Dalai Lama—so it is easy to imagine veiled or overt threats of a removal of Confucius Institute funds from an organization that sponsored a talk by him. Sometimes, representatives of the Chinese government are invited to attend campus speaker series supported by Confucius Institutes, so it is also possible that organizers of these series might steer clear of inviting foreign scholars with particularly close ties to dissidents in exile or mainland political prisoners to be part of these events, simply to minimize the chance for any awkwardness on the part of a patron.⁹

What is too rarely noted in commentaries on these Confucius Institutes is that, given the anti-Confucius stance of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao, Beijing’s choice of nomenclature is shocking to those with a sense of history. It is as though, late in the history of the Soviet Union, Moscow had

set up “Tsar Nicholas Institutes” to spread understanding of Russian culture around the world.

The revival of official Confucianism, which has led to the restoration of temples devoted to Confucius and the erection of statues of the sage (in some parts of China, these now outnumber the ones of Mao left over from the days when those proliferated), is one of many echoes in today’s China of the era of Chiang Kai-shek. Now, as then, the leader of a party that had previously been associated with upheaval (the Nationalist one also began as a radical revolutionary organization) is drawing inspiration from a philosopher who championed tradition and harmony.

There has also been a popular revival of interest in Confucius. One of the best-selling nonfiction books published in the PRC this century has been a work on the Analects by the academic-turned-media-personality Yu Dan. Her book, a kind of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* with Chinese characteristics that has sold millions of copies and has also appeared in English, has been criticized for bowdlerizing the ideas of Confucius. But there is no question that it has proved very popular.¹⁰

The government has hailed the Yu Dan phenomenon as evidence of the complementary nature of the people’s and the regime’s longing for social harmony. One could, though, also see it as part of a broader hunger among disillusioned people for something new to believe in—even if that something new is merely something very old repackaged in a novel way.

Yet the PRC regime has subtly scaled back its sponsorship of Confucius since the Olympics. One of the oddest incidents involving the sage occurred in 2011, when a thirty-one-foot-tall statue of Confucius was installed in Tiananmen Square, China’s most symbolically fraught public space, that January. In April, however, the massive statue disappeared overnight. It had been moved to a courtyard within the National Museum, just off the square. While government leaders claimed this had always been their plan for the statue, the sudden and covert nature of the move raised eyebrows among those who

scrutinize the regime's actions to see which way the political wind is blowing.¹¹ Although the Chinese leadership continues to emphasize Confucius and the need to develop a harmonious society, the state revival of Confucianism is not as intense now as it was around 2008.

Did Confucianism hinder imperial China's economic development?

The influential German social theorist Max Weber certainly thought Confucianism hindered imperial China's economic development. According to Weber, while Protestantism encouraged the sort of innovation and concern with transformation that drives capitalism, the emphasis Confucius put on recapturing the glories of past times was a brake on development. In addition, Confucian texts often claimed that, aside from the ruling family, there were four basic social groups in China; the two most valuable ones in the eyes of Confucius and his followers were scholars (who made sure that the country was well governed) and farmers (who provided society with food); of lesser value were artisans (who were not essential but made products that were useful) and least valued of all, indeed despised, were the merchants (who did not contribute to the good of the community at all).

There are two problems, however, with thinking of Confucianism as a block on economic development.

First, as work by Kenneth Pommeranz has shown, as late as 1750, the most economically vibrant parts of Confucian China were roughly as commercialized and prosperous as the most economically vibrant parts of Protestant Europe. Factors other than modes of thought thus need to be seen as leading to what Pommeranz calls the "great divergence" between Western and Chinese economic development after that point.¹² Other things that made a difference, Pommeranz claims, included the distribution of natural resources (England was lucky to have large coal supplies located in parts of the country that were

close to its commercial centers, for example) and the various forms that imperialism took, with European empires expanding overseas, whereas the Qing just moved inland. Britain's extraordinary takeoff, he insists, had much to do with the fact that it could make use of land-intensive products from overseas, facilitated by the legacies of slavery and colonialism and compensating for Europe's relatively low agricultural yields per acre, and had domestic coal deposits that were relatively easy to access. The Qing had plenty of areas to mine, but they were in regions that were hard to reach before the era of railroads.

The second problem with the idea that Confucianism and advanced economic development cannot go hand in hand is that many of the economic success stories of recent decades have involved East Asian countries that, like China, were influenced greatly by Confucianism. After the rapid takeoff of Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, the notion that Confucian values stand in the way of capitalism seems untenable.

There is also the fact that today's China, while not exactly capitalist—some 70 percent of the top five hundred companies in the PRC are state owned and much of its overall wealth is in the form of government assets—has experienced a great economic boom. That this transpired in an era of renewed celebration of Confucius is another nail in the Weberian conceptual coffin.

In the wake of recent economic shifts, some people have turned Weber upside down and claimed that, while Confucian thinkers may have dismissed merchants as unproductive, the kind of family-centered and generally collectivist and cooperative approach to life fostered by Confucianism is conducive to certain forms of highly profitable business activities. Whether or not this is true, the idea that people who share "Confucian" values, however defined, are naturally well disposed to do business with one another definitely matters. The largest investors in joint enterprises