

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is Confucius the Answer to the Spiritual Void in Communist China?

Chinese President Xi Jinping is clearly the most powerful Chinese leader in 40 years. As I am writing this the Chinese Communist Party Congress is occurring and that body has enshrined President Xi and his writings into the Chinese Constitution. Only founder Mao Tse-tung had received such an honor. A major concern of President Xi, himself an ardent atheist, is the spiritual void caused by decades of official atheism along with China's current headlong pursuit of wealth and prosperity. In fact, Communist China is attempting something never done in the modern world: Pursue a degree of free-market capitalism, which allows some ownership of private property and the amassing of personal wealth, while denying its people rights and liberties normally associated with a capitalist society. Will China succeed in this unprecedented pursuit of restricted freedom in a capitalist society? Without some kind of ethical system rooted in transcendent truth, how can China integrate free market capitalism into its totalitarian society? With atheism being the official conviction of the Party, Xi recognizes that pure naturalism provides no ethical framework, so he is pursuing China's traditional culture to provide the structure for personal morality and cultural ethics and to build a society of order, stability and respect.

In 2014, President Xi published an extraordinary book—*The Governance of China*—in which he acknowledged the “brilliant insights” of Confucius to explain his own political and social philosophy. Xi quoted Confucius to define what “men of virtue” look like: “When we see men of virtue, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of contrary character, we should examine ourselves.” He also argued that Chinese have always “developed their country through studying the nature of things, correcting thoughts with sincerity, cultivating the moral self, managing the family . . . and safeguarding peace under Heaven.” Xi clearly is appealing to Confucius to call for a capitalist China that respects authority, hierarchy and social order. As Robert D. Kaplan, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, argues, advocating Confucianism accomplishes several goals for President Xi:

1. It is the best insurance against chaos, especially in emphasizing the “virtues of loyalty and filial piety.”
2. Postmodern life in the West is often mocked by the Chinese because of its worship of youth, which they contend is evidence of cultural decadence, which in turn has produced a “generation of spoiled children.”
3. Confucianism strongly encourages tolerance and discourages insubordination. It is President Xi's answer to the tumultuous transition of this chaotic world where traditional family structures and ways of life are coming undone on every continent. He does not want that to happen in China.

4. Xi also wants to restore a sense of public morality. For that reason he is also promoting the works of a 16th century Confucian scholar named Wang Yangming, who maintained that people have an inborn conscience that they must act upon: an innate sense of right and wrong.

What exactly is Confucianism? Confucianism is more of a philosophy than a religion. In China and much of Asia it competes with and complements Buddhism and Taoism. The central idea of Confucianism is the concept of virtue, of right living. More than any other major world religion, Confucianism is an attempt to provide order and system to all human relationships. Justice and happiness for the individual and for society are the goals of the Confucian worldview.

Confucius, whose real name was K'ung Fu-tzu, was born in 551 B.C. His father died when he was three, leaving the family rather poor. At a young age he began his life-long love of poetry and immersed himself in the historical traditions of China. According to the autobiographical summary in his *Analects*, at fifteen he determined to be a scholar. He married at age nineteen and a year later had his only son. The government placed him in charge of the state granaries and of public lands in his province. The state also appointed him magistrate of his province and later minister of works and minister of justice. He continued to immerse himself in the ancient works of China. In fact, he became an authority on Chinese antiquity and became a teacher as well as a government official. Increasingly, his interest shifted to reforming the government and the society. This concern forced him to reflect on nature of political authority. What makes a good ruler? His writings and his teaching reflect this desire for reform.

Confucius's teaching on heaven and God is not of a religious nature that sees God as personal and infinite. He once said that "Absorption in the study of the supernatural is most harmful." Confucianism is a humanistic, this-worldly, rational, ethical teaching that has dominated the thought and action of the Chinese people for centuries. Fundamentally, Confucius taught that man was born essentially, innately and morally good. How is man to cultivate this innate goodness? For Confucius it meant following the Tao ("the way") to become the "ideal (or superior) man" (*chun-tzu*). Cultivating this intrinsic goodness will produce a life of service to the state and to all humans. Basic to the Confucian concept of "the ideal man" are five major virtues and five major social relationships.

- The five major virtues are (compared to the parts of a tree):

Jen—Mutual Benevolence (the will to seek the good of others)—(the root)

Yi—Righteousness by Justice (the trunk)

Li—Propriety or Reverence (the branches)

Chih—Wisdom (the flower)

Hsin—Faithfulness/Faith (the fruit)

The "ideal man" is the embodiment of **Jen** (pronounced ren), which is the internal motivation to fulfill the other virtues. Because one is benevolent, one will manifest justice

(**Yi**) and propriety (**Li**) in external relationships, so that wisdom (**Chih**) and faithfulness (**Hsin**) will be the overwhelming character traits of the “ideal man.” Confucius wrote “Desiring to sustain oneself, one sustains others; desiring to develop oneself, one develops others.” For that reason, the “ideal man” will always follow the Doctrine of the Mean: “Not to do to others what you do not wish yourself.”

- The five major social relationships demonstrate that the “ideal man” relates well to his family and extends his virtues to other members of society. These cardinal relationships and corresponding virtues look like this:

Relationship

sovereign to subject
father to son
elder to younger brother
husband to wife
friend to friend

Virtue

faithful loyalty
filial piety
fraternity
fidelity
friendly reciprocity

The family is the basic unit of society and the “ideal man” recognizes that. He also understands that the ideal society is one in which all citizens know their proper place and their respective virtues.

Because humans are innately good, Confucius envisioned a utopian society where the ruler would benevolently rule following the “Doctrine of the Mean,” seeking to become an “ideal man.” Therefore, his subordinates would seek to be the “ideal man” as well. If Confucius is correct that humans are predisposed to goodness, his scheme is possible. If humans are not predisposed to goodness, his scheme collapses into meaningless individual autonomy.

In so many ways, the basic religion of China remains ancestor worship. The teachings of Confucius gave ethical meaning to this worship. Because his ethical system begins with the family, he consistently taught that parents must be treated with total respect. He taught that children ought to stay close to parents, especially when elderly. Love for parents is a life time commitment and that continues after their death. He therefore regarded as most pious the acts of repairing and keeping in order the ancestral temples—carefully arranging the sacrificial vessels, the regalia and the heirlooms of the family and presenting appropriate sacrifices to them. Confucius thereby reinforced the ancient Chinese practice of ancestor worship.

According to the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius taught that the truths handed down from the ancients “harmonize with the divine order which governs the revolutions of the seasons in the Heaven above and . . . fit in with the moral design which is to be seen in physical nature upon the Earth below.” Confucius believed that his teachings, because they had their origin in the moral order of the world, were sanctioned by Heaven and carried eternal significance. However, there is no sense of a personal God in the Confucian worldview. “Heaven” to Confucius is not the abode of a sovereign, personal God, but a divine principle that is synonymous with the eternal order of things; Heaven manifests the “Tao” of the universe.

The elevation and worship of Confucius began between the 2nd and 1st century B.C. when the emperors honored him as a great sage and began to worship and make sacrifices at his grave. (One emperor sacrificed an ox, a sheep and a pig.) By the 2nd century A.D., readings, prayers, and gifts of money and silk added to the sacrifices at the grave. In 630 A.D., the Chinese emperor issued a decree obliging every governor of China to erect a state temple to Confucius and implement regular sacrifices to him.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Manchu rulers sought to make Confucianism the main religion of China. Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), founder of the Chinese Republic, continued to revere Confucius and tie his teaching to the new Republic. Chiang Kai-shek centered his leadership of the Chinese Nationalists (now on Taiwan) on the revised teachings of Confucius. Despite Mao Tse-tung's (1893-1976) attempt to destroy Confucianism and replace it with atheistic communism, since Mao's death, many Chinese continue to affirm the basic tenets of Confucianism. President Xi is consciously resurrecting Confucius as the moral and ethical foundation for the new China. Only time will tell if he is successful.

See James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 47-54; Robert D. Kaplan in the *Wall Street Journal* (7-8 February 2015); Ian Johnson, "Forget Marx and Mao, China has a New Sage. ." in the *New York Times* (19 October 2017).