

The Dark Side of Confucianism  
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Confucius, his name has become synonymous with Chinese culture, thought, and philosophy. In Taiwan his birthday, September 28, is celebrated as Teacher's Day. Born at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, Confucius (551—479 BC) is probably the most revered and dominant of Chinese philosophers. So who would criticize or challenge his teachings and what has this to do with current Chinese politics?

Confucianism upholds the nobility of man; it preaches benevolence, responsibility and reciprocity in relationships. Superiors should set an example and inspire others to be good; they should change themselves before they seek to change the world etc. etc. etc. How can such teachings have a dark side?

A Taoist would simply say, "When everyone sees good in the good, the bad is already there," but let us look into specifics.

First a look at the history, the teachings of Confucius and his disciple Mencius (c.372~289 BC) began to gain official prominence in Chinese society from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC~8 AD) on. The Emperor Wu Ti founded an Imperial Academy (124 BC) where officials would be specifically trained in the Confucian classics for a year and pass exams for positions. This began the civil service examinations. From then on the works of Confucius began to be serve as the ideological background and framework of the state.

By the time of the Tang Dynasty (618~907 AD) the Confucian classics had become firmly entrenched in the civil service examinations. To hold any official district, provincial and national position in China you had to know Confucian thought forward and backward and how to express it (not necessarily believe it). Confucian classics became the Bible or at least the catechism of the state. This would continue even when China as a country (not as a culture) disappeared and it became part of the Mongolian and Manchu kingdoms.

After two thousand years it is no wonder that Confucianism became completely ingrained as part of officialdom and subsequently part of the culture. People were taught the Confucian hierarchy and that harmony lies in submission; a pyramidal submission where the many submitted to the few as we shall see shortly. Picture the benefits to the emperor and state officials learning a system, which justified them at the top of the food chain and required all others to be subservient. Who would not want to perpetuate such a system?

Confucianism was of course not the only influential tradition in Chinese thought. The Legalist tradition developed in the fourth and third centuries BC after the death of Confucius. Legalism found its fullest expression in the Ch'in Dynasty (221~207 BC). Machiavellian in aim and view, this tradition focused not on what should be, but what is.

It analyzed power, how to acquire it, how to maintain it, and how to control the people with it. Disorder or dissent of any kind in the state was not to be tolerated.

Han Fei-tzu (d. 233 BC) is considered the chief proponent of legalism. Where Confucianism stressed man's potential for goodness, Legalism stressed man's potential for laziness, evil, selfishness, and deviation. These two schools of thought started from completely different premises, but interestingly enough, Legalism would be credited in part with providing the mechanism for unifying all the warring states under Ch'in Shih Huang (Shih Huang-ti), the founder of the Ch'in Dynasty.

The defining word for legalism is control, control, control and control. The state needs strong rulers but most especially strong laws to keep man in check. Han Fei-tzu stated that the emperor could use two handles to control the behavior of his subordinates. These were rewards that would appeal to man's greed and stiff punishments that would inspire his fear. Legalism's brief, ruthless expression in the Ch'in Dynasty was short-lived in history but it left a lasting mark on Chinese thought in reality.

What is the link of these two unlikely philosophies? In Chinese society, Confucianism would come to be held up as the ideal; while legalism would become what was practiced. Despite their opposite views of the nature of man, in this symbiotic relationship Confucianism's worldview would ironically end up supporting the legalist position and **herein is its dark side.**

Confucianism was the product of an agricultural, feudalistic society; its purpose was to keep harmony within the structure of such an outdated society. To do this, it postulated that life should be seen in terms of five basic relationships and four class structures. This is the base we must examine.

Simply put, the five relationships are emperor to subject; father to son; elder brother to younger brother, husband to wife, and friend to friend. Some would add a sixth, that of teacher to student. These relationships are role relationships not personal relationships; they don't change; they are part and parcel of a system that is hierarchical and patriarchal.

Each of these relationships, except that of friend to friend depends on a hierarchy. They contain superior and subordinate roles. Both the superior and the subordinate have their duties and obligations, but let there be no mistake; it is always in the context of superior and subordinate.

The four social groups or class structures of the society are the scholar-gentry, the peasants, the artisans and craftsmen and finally the merchants. The scholar-gentry were deemed fit to rule because of their education. The peasants, the majority of the people, had second place and were given the dignity of work; this supposedly was to compensate for the fact that they had no real power. The artisans (3<sup>rd</sup> place) were allowed artistic expression, which is probably better than being a hard-working farmer. Merchants were given the lowest class because they went for profit (a despicable factor for

Confucianists). How many would not postulate the opposite view that in the real world, money is power?

Is there a gap between ideal and practice? Today the world is trying to beat a path to the great China market. At the same time the factories in China pour forth all sorts of sundry items "Made in China." Of those who have a choice in this matter how many would freely choose a "noble" life of a farmer tilling the soil by the sweat of his brow? How many choose a more "despicable" but lucrative career? I rest my case.

However, to return to Confucian ideals. Life (as was said) is seen in terms of role relationships, not personal relationships. Herein is the rub. Initially the roles may have been spoken of as a superior/subordinate relationship; in practice the change to superior/inferior is quick and almost unnoticeable. Cut it whatever way you want; quote the obligations of those on each side of the spectrum, at the end of the day, when push comes to shove, one is on top and the other is on the bottom, one is in control and one is not. There is no such thing as equality.

A father never switches roles with a son; a wife never switches roles with her husband; an older brother never switches roles with his younger brother. A teacher never switches roles with his student; the emperor never switches roles with his subjects (barring a revolution in which case he is killed). Why in the past 2000 years had the ideas of democracy and the equality of man never been recognized until the present? Confucian structures would not allow it.

Is this idealistic hierarchical structure that bad? Women, particularly feminists most easily saw through the mutual responsibility sham. Confucianism's concept of roles for life has dealt them all the bad cards. In such a society, a woman is first subject to her father (a male), then to her husband (another male) and finally if she is widowed to her son (another male). Women had to know their place and stay in it.

In such a position a woman must either become submissive and hope the superior lives up to his obligations or learn to compensate and fight for power by becoming wily and manipulative, or resorting to cajoling and nagging. A woman can never ask for straightforward treatment as an equal.

Males have always had the opportunity for balance. Even if they were sons to their fathers and younger brothers to their elder brothers, they could gain balance in their lives by being fathers to their sons and husbands to their wives. Such was not the fate of women.

If anyone has lived in Chinese society for any length of time, you quickly see that despite all the external rituals of consideration and displays of harmony it is primarily a power culture. The relationships may be expressed as ideally mutual, but they are hierarchical in practice. The authoritarian father-knows-best mentality pervades. When you witness a divorce between a man and a woman it is almost always a bitter, hate-to-the-death affair because it involves not only the two people but also an affirmation or negation of what

each believes is the way life and society should be. The bottom line question in all matters business, political and social comes down to who has the power?

And Legalism, is it still a viable part of Chinese political thought? Look at the People's Republic of China (PRC). The "liberation" of the masses allegedly took place over 55 years ago in 1949, yet in how many ways does authoritarian control remain? The totalitarian one-party state still rules.

When the students (not radical revolutionaries) expressed the wish for more democratic participation in Tiananmen Square in 1989, they were ruthlessly murdered and their movement was put down. Here was no Confucian trust in the benevolence of man's nature. It was a legalistic response that the Ch'in emperor would be proud of. In the name of "preventing chaos" this and other atrocities continue to be done.

Even in matters of religious expression, the state seeks absolute control. The Falun Gong are beaten and jailed regularly simply because they wish to gather in public. These elderly "radicals" are not to be trusted. In the Catholic Church, the state wants to appoint all bishops. In Tibetan Buddhism, Beijing chose the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama in defiance of the Dalai Lama. Control, control, control.

Look further at the restrictions and continued monitoring and censoring of news media and the Internet. The "liberated masses" are still denied free access to information. They cannot be trusted with it. The list of controls can go on and on.

What then is the strange symbiosis of Legalism and Confucianism? How does Confucianism support such a controlling system? In politics it generates a winner take all mentality; there is no such thing as a loyal opposition party. Once a power is established, the hierarchy must be maintained. Confucianism's hierarchical worldview is anti-democratic. There is no place for dissent. You can speak of an emperor losing the "mandate of heaven" but this euphemism is only applied after the fact to those who lose the power struggle not to those who have still maintained it despotically.

In the name of harmony, Confucianism legitimizes and provides legalists with the time they need to consolidate their control. Look at the histories of self-appointed emperor Yuan Shih-kai (d.1916) who blessed China by dying early and Mao Tse-tung who did not.

Chiang Kai-shek preached Confucian values but practiced a totalitarian, one-party rule. His legacy of continued subjection of Taiwan to martial law I have already treated in #12 of this series.

And what about other major philosophical traditions in Chinese thought like Taoism and Buddhism? These may have influenced certain rulers and people but they have never dominated central political thought. Interestingly enough, Taoism allows the spark of individualism in a highly communal Chinese culture. Taoism has become the safety valve to release the pressure created by an over insistence on harmony. Taoism allows one to

withdraw from the world and operate in a different sphere. It is the thinking behind two expressions that one often hears spoken privately. “The Laws are for other people, not for me,” and/or “The Law is only there as a reference point.”

Buddhism on the other hand provides a viewpoint that promotes concern for other people, those outside one’s family. Always suspect in the eyes of strict Confucianism, Buddhism is credited with removing the warlike spirit and curbing the acquisitiveness of Tibetans who once had captured the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Buddhism did not have such political influence on China, which in true legalist fashion pursues its aims to control the past Manchu conquered territories of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Taiwan etc.

There is nothing wrong with Confucian values per se. However, the true examiner of any philosophical system must go beyond the system’s professed values and examine the underpinnings, presuppositions and “paradigmatic baggage” it brings with it. Platonism, for example, saddled western thought with an outmoded dualistic way of perceiving the world for over 2000 years. Many are still locked into a Platonic idealism.

Where should Chinese turn? They do have one example that has broken the political mold of the past. Taiwan has shown that democracy is not antithetical to Chinese thought. Democracy happened here. It came however not from the Kuomintang ruling party but from the tangwai (those outside the party) who were already on the island.

Taiwan’s history in its experience of numerous and various outside rulers is different from that of China. One ruler, Japan, had already established a multi-party system and Diet form of government in the 1890’s before Taiwan came under its control. Taiwan’s taste and struggle for democratic participation had definite roots in its Japanese era when it had gained the right to elect its own representatives to the Japanese Imperial Diet.

Is there a chance that those on the other side of the Taiwan Strait could learn from Taiwan’s struggles and example? This is highly unlikely. A false interpretation of Confucianism’s respect for history and tradition interferes. This misinterpretation has already created a legacy of cultural superiority that can only look backward for ideals. It prevents Mainland Chinese from even thinking they could learn from a period tainted with Japanese rule.

Taiwan and China look on Japan with different eyes. For China, Japan will always be the cultural son, the student who learned from the Tang Dynasty. The teacher can never change roles with the student; the father can never change roles with the son. Japan will always have the inferior role.

It would also be unthinkable for Beijing to imagine it could learn from Taipei (i.e. Taiwan). Since the Manchus once controlled a part of the island of Taiwan, Beijing can only see Taiwan with eyes of control. Whenever Taiwan offers the olive branch for open dialogue between the “two Chinas,” Beijing responds in legalist fashion that it does not trust Taiwan’s motives. As if history has ever given Taiwan reason to trust the motives of the wolf on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

What is left? Legalistic control is not the answer. A reexamination of the spirit underlying the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (1919) is needed to establish the proper role of Confucianism. At that time at least the traditions of language and literature were freed.

In the western world, it was learned that the separation of Church and State was a necessary part of the development of democracy. Christianity still remains a part of the culture and ideals, but democratic participation must be free of it. In theory, in a perfect world, one can make a case for a Christian state, an Islamic state, a Hindu state or a Confucian state. But the world we live in is not the world where these religions and philosophies were formed and it never will be. Perhaps those idealized pasts never existed in reality.

The dark side of Confucianism with its roles and structures must be faced; if not those with a legalist mentality and outlook will always manipulate it to their ends.

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