

You can't kill Confucius

An ancient sage makes a comeback to serve the Communist party's purposes in China

By Yenni Kwok



“Serve the people, don't betray them,” urges one line printed in posters that are plastered all throughout Beijing. These “Eight Honors, Eight Shames” posters are the latest political propaganda and ‘theoretical musings’ of President Hu Jintao, expected to be written into the Chinese constitution in the upcoming Communist Party Congress later this month.

Make no mistake, however. These Communist-like sayings, which include calls to love the country, help each other, be disciplined, and dissuasions not to harm the motherland, sacrifice ethics for profits and wallow in luxuries, are in fact Confucian in spirit.

Confucianism is indeed back in vogue in China. The recent birthday of the great philosopher was celebrated with much pomp across the country. Ceremonies paying homage to Confucius, said to be born 2,558 years ago, were held in various temples even in far-flung provinces, as far as Sichuan and Fujian, Guangxi and Jilin.

The biggest celebration was in his birthtown, Qufu in Shandong province. A record number of 3,500 people attended the colorful celebration in late September, broadcast live nationwide by the state-run television. Leading the procession at the Confucius Temple were party cadres and officials from the national, provincial and city governments. The VIP list included the descendants of Master Kong, as Confucius is also known, and academic-turned-TV celebrity Yu Dan, whose commentary on the

master's works, *Notes on the Analects*, sold for 4 million copies within four months.

“We know China is a communist country, but all our beliefs are also based on China's traditional culture,” declared Hou Duanmin, vice mayor of Jining City (which also administers Qufu) amidst the fanfare that included 1,500 students' reciting lines from the master's classics and a mass performance of ancient ritual dance. The festivity reached its climax with burning incense at the altar, in front of the looming statue of the sage.

Such reverence to the ancient philosopher was unthinkable even 10 years ago. “The situation has totally changed,” says Tu Weiming, Confucian philosopher and professor at Harvard University. “It has something to do with the economic vibrancy of China; the Chinese voice has become more audible. The big question now is the new search for cultural identity.”

The revival of Confucianism coincides with the growing interest in Chinese traditional heritage. Earlier this year, Starbucks was evicted from the Forbidden City after a TV anchorman, writing in his blog, declared its presence there was “a contamination to Chinese culture.” Last December, a group of scholars urged non-Christians not to celebrate Christmas. “Western culture is growing from a gentle wind and light rain into a heavy storm in China,” the group said in their posting on a Confucianism website.

According to Professor Tu, China faces two options in its search for an identity. “The cultural identity could lead to national pride, but this can become more chauvinistic and more nationalistic,” he says. “Another option is the cultural identity that is based on an open, pluralistic countenance that exhibits a very high level of flexibility.”

An example of the former is the 1990s debate over Asian values. Confucianism, which traditionally emphasizes regimented social relations including ruler-subject and father-son ones, enjoyed a brief revival in Southeast Asia. As the East and Southeast Asian nations basked in the success of economic prosperity and faced mounting social challenges (not unlike China of today), Lee Kuan Yew, the patriarch of Singapore, championed the shared values of the “Confucianist sphere of influence,” dubbing them “Asian values,” a spurious notion at best, since many of the countries scattered across Asia from Japan to India hardly share anything beyond the same hemisphere. After the financial crisis in 1997, Asian

values disappeared into oblivion. In an interview with *Newsweek* in 2001, Lee acknowledged that “Confucian” values had become obsolete under the demands of global economy.

Nonetheless, the travesty of Asian values also underlined one interesting aspect of Confucianism: until recently, it flourished largely outside China. In the early 1900s, Chinese intellectuals blamed Confucianism, the political dogma of imperial rulers, as the culprit of China’s malaise. It took a further blow during the Communist rule, denounced for its ‘feudalistic values’. During the Cultural Revolution, Confucian temples, including the one in Qufu, were smashed and desecrated by the Red Guards. In a more bizarre episode, following his downfall and mysterious death, Lin Biao, the heir apparent of Mao, was condemned as “that traitor who sold our nation” and “a close follower of Confucius.”

During those decades, however, Confucian thought survived overseas and in the periphery of mainland China. New Confucianism movement, which believes the Chinese thought should incorporate Western ideas such as democracy, first emerged among the academics in Hong Kong and Taiwan and later thrived in the United States. The Boston Confucians, with leading figures including Professor Tu of Harvard University, Robert Neville and John Berthrong of Boston University, played a major role in introducing the thought in the West.

It was during its venture overseas that Confucianism evolved through its encounter with Western thinkers. Professor Tu, who says he is influenced by both Confucian philosophers and Christian theologians like St Augustine and Søren Kierkegaard, has introduced the Confucian idea of ‘salvation’. (This isn’t the first religious encounter; the Neo-Confucians of the Song and Ming dynasties drew greatly from Buddhist thought).

Confucianism has made a comeback in recent years just as the more affluent China faces growing social ills, from land disputes to environmental devastation, to corruption scandals to child slavery. It’s not only the leaders who are worried, common folks too. “Our world is like a cherry tree growing pumpkins,” sighs a 34-year-old man called Pang Fei, who opens a private Confucian academy in Beijing. “The world has become so complex that we don’t understand it anymore.”

“Without goodness a man cannot for long endure adversity, cannot for long endure prosperity,” the master said in *the Analects*, written from the Spring and Autumn era to the Warring States period – a very turbulent time in Chinese history. Confucianism, with its notions of harmony,

virtue, benevolence and righteousness, gives some hope for guidance in this confusing time, and some people may argue that with its emphasis on governance and social relations, it shares some traits with Communism.

Hu and his premier Wen Jiabao may also see it that way. In their quest for 'harmonious society', these senior Communist cadres have no qualms to dig into Confucian tenets. But hasn't history shown whenever Confucianism got co-opted by the government, it can be detrimental on the school of thought? "Yes, it could have negative effects," Professor Tu admits, but he rejects that Confucianism is all about the status quo and authoritarianism.

"There is a major distinction what is practical, and what is ideal," he says. "You have people who want to support the government, give up their own idealism and are very practical. Then, you have public intellectuals: they are politically concerned, socially involved and culturally sensitive [which are the embodiment of Confucian values]. They envision themselves as the public conscience."

The scholar believes these public intellectuals may lead to democracy. "One vision of democracy is public reasoning," he says. "All these discussions will have a direct impact on policy formulation, allowing people's participation in the political process. But one important criterion for this is freedom of expression. Unless that happens, the public reasoning is distorted."

And so is the true potential of Confucianism.

The article was published at Asia Sentinel (www.asiasentinel.com), 12 October 2007