

Confucian Politics and Its Redress: From Radicalism to Gradualism

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The current revival of Confucianism in China comes at a timely moment, for no country *can* be governed by a relentless nationwide pursuit of wealth without core values. This revival, however, is not accompanied by a careful awareness of possible defects in Confucianism as a theory of politics, if by politics we mean a science and art of government or public and social ethics.

I

It is widely believed that Taoism and Confucianism, the yin and yang in Chinese culture, are mutually complementary. As the two primary Taoist texts, *Tao De Ching* and *Zhuang Zi*, are great pieces of literature, Taoism has enjoyed a more favorable reception in countries outside Asia and is sometimes the source of inspiration for beautiful literary works like W. B. Yeats's poem '*Lapis Lazuli*' and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Oriental Tales*.

Arguably Yourcenar's favorite writer *was* Zhuang Zi, the arch rebel against social habits and prejudices and also a master of the art of defamiliarization. When Herbert A. Giles's translation of *Zhuang Zi* appeared in 1890, Oscar Wilde heartily welcomed it in *The Artist as Critic* (1969: 221) as 'the most caustic criticism of modern life'. At the bottom of his heart an anarchist, this Victorian dandy was intrigued by the Chinese author's 'wicked transcendental aim', which is spelt out in snappy sentences like 'All modes of government are wrong' and 'Do nothing, and everything will be done.' Living in a society of order and stability, Wilde could afford such appreciative generosity.

For Zhuang Zi, an individual is entitled to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will. When Aristotle (*Politics*, 1253a) defined human beings as 'political animals', he considered the individual cut off from his *polis* as 'a non co-operator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts'. But this principle is turned upside down by the

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apolitical Chinese sage. Wilde sided with Zhuang Zi as regards extreme individuality and used Zhuang Zi's subtle but subversive philosophy to dismiss all the 'humanitarian societies', 'philanthropist organizations' and 'dull lectures about one's duty to one's neighbours' in his society. Hardly any Chinese visitors to Britain at that time would have found Wilde's dismissal congenial. Here and there they would have noted that the spirit of charity was woven deeply into the warp and weft of British society, or expressed their delighted amazement at the very existence of volunteer organizations such as the 'Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals'.

We might also take a brief look at China through the eyes of Wilde's contemporaries. At the turn of the 20th century, G. E. Morrison, an English colonial and correspondent for *The Times* in Beijing, made the embarrassing remark that China was a hodge-podge of humanity rather than a nation. As a result, 'he jeered all over the country, patriotism weighed not more than an ounce' (Lo Hui-Min, Introduction to Morrison, 1976). For his part Timothy Richard, one of the most influential British missionaries to China at that time, described in *Forty-Five Years in China* (1916) how, around 1880, he almost single-handedly provided relief to famine victims in Shandong province, with the local authorities standing idly by. Richard had neither the time nor the taste for prattles about governmental do-nothingism.

Indeed, in a time of environmental crisis and materialist greed, Taoist emphasis on harmony between man and nature could serve as a corrective to unbridled industrialism and developmentalism. But what in a poet or unconventional philosopher is a merit may well be a vice in a statesman. If the implied political message in Taoism is put into practice as a social principle, disasters will no doubt ensue. Comparing Western humanism with Taoist naturalism, Frederick W. Mote (1989: 62–3) perceptively pointed out:

Humanism in the West developed in response to (or against) religious authoritarianism, and pagan nature was readily associable with its humanism for historical and cultural reasons. In China Taoist idealization of nature was part of a pessimism about humanity's capacity to keep order and safety in society; it sought nature as a refuge from humanity . . . Taoism therefore came to regard social man as a misguided being. It scorned government, feared progress and civilization, and was wary of all kinds of technical skills. It came to see all standards, definitions, distinctions, and classifications (in which Confucianism placed such value) as degenerating devices destructive to the healthy state of pristine nature. It emerged in an age of social disorder – as did Confucianism – and its obsession came to be the preservation of life. It withdrew to nature because it found human society too hazardous.

Consequently Taoism has a mundane aspect – the pursuit of longevity through whatever means.

II

It is believed by many that Taoism is fundamentally at variance with Confucianism, which cares very much about people's well-being, the manifest final objective of government. What makes Confucian politics more attractive to the modern mind is that

it has an element of democracy: 'Heaven sees according as my people see; Heaven hears according as my people hear' (Mencius, 5a.5).¹ But looked at closely, the two schools of thought share something surprising in common: both accept the concept of weak government and neither is really interested in public ethics, the very foundation of politics.

There is a famous doctrine in *Tao De Ching* (ch. 60): the art of governing a large country is like cooking a small fish — leave it alone (otherwise it will fall apart). Nowhere could we find a more vivid expression of the gospel of governmental non-interference. Laissez-faireism, it must be admitted, is also an integral part of Confucianism. In *The Analects*, Shun, one of the two renowned leaders of the Golden Age, was instanced by Confucius as 'having governed without exertion' (无为而治). 'He did nothing but gravely and reverently occupy his royal seat' (15.4). The Confucian political world is free from a Hobbesian Leviathan, fortunately or not. Governmental inaction was further confirmed by Mencius, who argued that 'the administration of a state is not difficult; it lies in not offending the great families' (4a.6). The proper functions of state seem to have been delegated or surrendered to households of power.

If a benevolent government treats its people very well, Mencius says, it is sparing in the use of punishment and fines, and the taxes and levies are light. This parental kindness is considered the source of political power. Both Confucius and Mencius believe that man is born good, and this innate goodness enables him to follow a more virtuous person. The tricky business of managing a state depends almost solely upon the cultivation of the private individual. If you are a good man, your virtue and teachings will spread everywhere within the four seas like the rush of water, and people in all places will flock to you irresistibly, also like the rush of water.

Confucianism differentiates the superior man from lower people. When the edifying power of moral example is asserted and made absolute, the boundaries between the two categories ironically crumble. Mencius says, 'If the sovereign be benevolent, all will be benevolent. If the sovereign be righteous, all will be righteous' (4a.20). Often the term 'people' in Confucian texts seems to refer to a unified whole with no internal conflicts of interests. In the imaginary political world of Confucius and Mencius, lions and foxes are conspicuously absent. He who loves and respects others is constantly loved and respected; everybody does unto others as he/she would be done by. There must be an invisible hand of morality that brings all social activities and relations into happy harmony.

An unexpected result of this belief is that people from lower social orders, since they are automatically drawn to copy the behavior of the superior man, do not have to be responsible for their own conduct. There is a customary saying in China that if the upper beam is not straight, the lower beams will go aslant. Unfortunately there is no shortage of corrupt officials to account for the commonality's misdemeanors or serious offences.

The Great Learning, one of the basic Confucian texts, opens with the theme that once you rectify your heart, cultivate your person and regulate your family, then you can order your state well. A smooth transition from private virtues to public good is effected in this celebrated statement. Mandeville is perhaps mistaken in believing that private vices make public good, but it is equally misleading to assert that private

virtues are always consistent with public interests. The Confucian visions of reality are monist, for values are coherent and compatible: there is a set of overarching standards in terms of which all private and public conduct can be evaluated. But righteous hearts and well ordered families are not necessarily common bedfellows. It is purely the state's business to deal with possible tensions and conflicts of various kinds in the public sphere through political means. Confucian social theory somehow gives the impression that it would not enter into that unpleasant world.

It is also a Western view that true self-love and social love are the same. As Alexander Pope lauded self-love in *An Essay on Man*:

God loves from Whole to Parts: but human soul
Must rise from Individual to the Whole.
Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre mov'd, a circle strait succeeds,
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace,
His country next, and next all human race,
Wide and more wide, th'o'erflowings of the mind
Take ev'ry creature in, of ev'ry kind;
Earth smiles around, with boundless bounty blest,
And Heav'n beholds its image in his breast. (iv, 1273–1284)

These concentric circles are as orderly as Pope's Augustan heroic couplets. But usually in real life there is more than one pebble simultaneously stirring the mirror-like lake and the surface is thrown into confusion as the circles meet and collide. Easier said than done. Pope's own love would not ripple out evenly from the center to the periphery. In *The Dunciad* he vents his spleen on literary institutions around him and so heartily holds up fellow-writers to ridicule.

One of the weaknesses of Confucianism as political theory is that politics, or in other words public and social ethics, is often discussed within the realm of private virtues. It would do injustice to Confucius if we accuse him of being ignorant of the difference between the private and the public. When conflicts between the two arise, the public has to give way to the private. In *The Analects*, the Duke of Sheh informs Confucius that in their part of the country, there are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their father has stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact. Confucius risked ambiguity in replying that among his people, 'the father conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.' (13.18) Considering the fact that filial piety is the keystone in a Confucian moral structure, Confucius seems to endorse this norm of behavior among his people.

In Christianity it is also assumed that virtuous rulers create virtuous men, but human nature is never flattered. Here we find the divide between Christianity and Confucianism. It can be said that Confucian political theories tend to overlook the disgraceful indulgences of human frailties or even wickedness. Confucianism is almost exactly the opposite of Machiavellianism. It would never occur to Confucius and Mencius that people could be ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly or covetous; but once a person succeeds others will follow him entirely, not simply because of his

moral goodness. Statecraft to the two Chinese sages is hardly necessary; and cunning and duplicity are outright moral offences. This outlook does not assert that they were better men, but that they were not driven by a clear-sighted passion as strong as that of Machiavelli for the unity, peace and prosperity of his country. T. S. Eliot (1928: 39–52) discovered that it was the Florentine's passionate patriotism that urged him to 'blow the gaff on human nature'.

The two Confucian masters spent much of their life traveling through quite a number of states to promote their moral philosophy. Peace and prosperity depend upon, and in turn support, the virtues of the citizen. At that time national awareness was not crystallized, otherwise their theory of politics would have been enriched and enlivened by collective ideals of service to the state and by what Edmund Burke would call 'locality of public feeling'.

The idea of 'all under heaven' might be praiseworthy in an age torn by militant nationalism, but it is not conducive to the birth of robust theories about the peace, glory and splendor of a particular state or nation, where virtues like fortitude, valor and public-spiritedness have a chance to thrive, and citizens are able to prosper, to realize the best of their selves and to feel proud of the achievement of their community.

III

Actual processes of governance throughout Chinese history have not always been characterized by Confucian political ideals. However, these ideals, deeply rooted in the background of collective unconsciousness, could have been responsible for phenomena worthy of our attention: a public domain characterized by weak government, lack of public space, no volunteer or non-kinship organizations mediating between government and people. Society as a whole was composed of loose monads of families and clans.

Geographically the country was perhaps too big to rule. Despite government monopolies over salt and iron, which however often existed only in name, economically Chinese society had adopted a *laissez-faire* policy because of poor communication and transport. Politically the same policy also applied. The aphorism 'the sky is high and the emperor far away' speaks loudly of the lawlessness and ineffectiveness of government intervention in traditional Chinese society. In 1914, three years after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, a Japanese historian attributed the widespread scourge of banditry in China to government inaction. He put forward the view that the Chinese imperial court, because it had been too weak to maintain a basic level of social justice, had allowed the strong to oppress the weak and the great to tyrannize the small. Lawbreakers seemed safely beyond the reach of law (Spence, 1978, only one of the myriad stories of absolute misery). Eventually the insulted and injured had to resort to extreme means to protect their rights to subsistence (Kimiya, 1914: ch. 51). Another Japanese scholar Watanabe Hideyoshi pointed out in his *Chinese Characteristics* that the Japanese would feel confident in state protection, whereas ordinary Chinese had to rely upon themselves for personal security. This lack of a sense of security ate into the fabric of the public world and may well have been

responsible for a certain degree of social indifference and self-centeredness among many Chinese. We learn from the classical novel *Water Margin* how villagers were practising martial arts for self-protection against gangsters. Police forces in the modern sense were only established at the very beginning of the 20th century, during and after the foreign occupation of Tianjing following the Boxer Rebellion.

Before the Communists came to power in 1949, Chinese neighborhoods could easily be terrorized by criminal mafias, despotic landlords and local ruffians (Smith, 1968: ch. 20). The absence of a public force further undermined social solidarity. Hence the proverbial Chinese incapability of mutual help: each one sweeps the snow from his own doorsteps and doesn't bother about the frost on his neighbor's roof. The irony is that in China concerted collective effort has been a matter of life and death in their historical context: for instance Great Yu leading his people in the fight against the flooding of the Yellow River; but in reality a hundred years ago the country was so poorly organized in a social sense that its people were adequately described as 'a sheet of loose sand'.

IV

The state of affairs was indeed dismal at that time. In a political climate favorable to radical change, terms like 'republic', 'democracy', 'revolution' and 'liberty' were introduced into China and there appeared a surge of interest in political theories. Chinese students and intellectuals felt frustrated at their country's humiliation and the Manchus, the ruling ethnic group, were conveniently used as scapegoats for China's failure. But the development of a discourse of liberty and revolution was strangely separated from stubborn social realities and deep-rooted customs. (It is this kind of atmospheric rhetoric that some Chinese political scientists have come to be vigilant against.) The young radicals, like those revolutionary men of letters in 18th century France, had a fondness for broad generalizations, cut-and-dried legislative systems, and a contempt for hard facts. When the old regime was toppled, they had nothing concrete and constructive to say, except their 'desire to reconstruct the entire constitution according to the rules of logic and a preconceived system instead of trying to rectify its faulty parts' (Tocqueville, 1966: 168).

The fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 was followed by one makeshift government after another and decades of civil wars. Warlords and nationalists of different stripe as well as a self-appointed emperor entered into a most disgraceful but inevitable struggle for power. They traded vital national interests for financial support from foreign powers. The newly created 'republic' caught the attention of Frank J. Goodnow, the first president of the American Political Science Association and for many years the president of Johns Hopkins University. Contemporary political scientists think of Goodnow as a historical institutionalist because of his interest in the indispensability of the whole range of state and societal institutions for a country's political life and public administration. Goodnow would dismiss offhand those who equated the complicated working of democracy with formalities of polling stations and the doctrine of 'one-person, one-vote'.

Serving as legal advisor to 'the Republic of China' in Beijing from 1913 to 1914,

Goodnow took part in drafting a provisional constitution for a country that in his view willfully underestimated the burden of its cultural and political inheritance. He shrewdly observed that China did not possess the social and political conditions necessary for Western-style democracy, or the 'nuts and bolts' of a representative system. He even agreed with the reform-minded mandarins towards the end of the Qing Dynasty that a constitutional monarchy was more practical than a 'republican' framework incapable of securing either responsible government or administrative efficiency.

Goodnow did not harbor the illusion that what is good for one nation must be good for another. His hesitation at importing the American political system into China recalls Edmund Burke's attentiveness to stubborn details. Burke (1969: 312) expressed his respect for the French people by not urging upon them a direct imitation of the British model, even though he was one of the most staunch critics of the French Revolution: 'I must see with my own eyes, I must, in a manner, touch with my own hands, not only the fixed, but the momentary circumstances, before I could venture to suggest any political project whatsoever.'

Ten years after the Nationalist Revolution of 1911, Bertrand Russell called for a good and orderly government that could develop national industry and popularize education. To secure success for these objectives, he suggested, the Chinese should cultivate political consciousness and a public spirit, as well as a sense of social duty (Russell, 1922: ch. 15). His (then) wife Dora Russell recorded her observations when people outside Beijing were dying of famine. The foreigners had organized some relief and were shocked at the apparent indifference of the Chinese. 'People here are horribly callous about relief. They leave their severely ill neighbours alone, even when they are dying' (Russell, 1978: 125).

Dr Sun Yat-sen deplored this state of disunity and apathy when drawing up his blueprint for a future modern China in 1917, without realizing that he himself might be partially responsible for this tragedy. He came to see, albeit belatedly, that what was needed were citizens with civic virtues and a strong and centralized government. His successor Jiang Kai-shek attempted to centralize power, but he failed, because of the interruption of the Japanese war and the severe challenges from the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong.

In the 1920s young radicals of leftist conviction refused to accept reform as being too long and slow an operation. They idealistically believed that human beings were naturally good and perfectible; all evils arose from irrational and therefore bad social and political arrangements. They were unfamiliar with or resistant to a gradualist line of thinking. Moderation was stigmatized as the trademark of cowards. The present could be sacrificed for a remote future, heads could be severed and blood shed, but there should be no concessions to reality, no compromises or reconciliatory gestures of any kind. The winner took all. This language of defiance and confrontation has fortunately come to a peaceful end, but for several decades it enjoyed widespread currency.

It was for quite a long time the trademark of Chinese political correctness: the most beautiful picture is one drawn on a clean sheet of paper. Mao would have no patience with the plodding speed of the tortoise. In one of his poems he asked his followers to stay away from the gradualist approach: 'Oh no, ten thousand years? It's

too long./Make it, here and now.' Hence, the Great Leap Forward, miracles of a moment and all the unrealistic plans for never-never land.

Here I do not intend to go into detail about Mao's 1949 revolution, though his mistakes and blunders are not to be glossed over. Unlike Confucian politics that tends to identify the private with the public, Mao candidly insisted that there were two worlds, that of personal morality and that of public organization, two conflicting systems of value. In this aspect he was like Machiavelli the nationalist patriot. Mao inculcated in the young the idea that what makes a nation great are civic and collective virtues rather than private virtues. Indeed, 'one cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs'. Like Machiavelli, Mao broke too many eggs, but the omelette was finally prepared. In a moment of self-irony, Mao boasted he had outdone the First Emperor in many aspects. He was surely not saying something too far-fetched.

The activities of Mao before the 1950s can be interpreted from a new perspective. The following is a sympathetic account of Machiavelli given by Isaiah Berlin, a Zionist and also one of the leading champions for the cause of liberty in the 20th century. 'Once you embark on a plan for the transformation of a society you must carry it through no matter at what cost: to fumble, to retreat, to be overcome by scruples is to betray your chosen cause. To be a physician is to be a professional, ready to burn, to cauterize, to amputate; if that is what the disease requires, then to stop half way because of personal qualms, or some rule unrelated to your art and its technique, is a sign of muddle and weakness, and will always give you the worst of both worlds' (Berlin, 1997: 59). These words may well also apply to Mao's enterprise and his departure from Confucian politics. His greatest merit was that an unprecedentedly strong and centralized government and a considerable degree of administrative efficiency were finally achieved. Perhaps for the first time in China's long history the government wiped out banditry completely. This was Mao's contribution, though made at (sometimes unnecessarily) great human cost. But the launching pad had been laid for gradualist reformers. Only with an intricate administrative machinery could the reform-minded government of Deng Xiao-ping assume the task of regulating on a grand scale a complex economy in the process of decentralization and re-structuring.

V

Nowadays many Chinese students of political science are prudent and pragmatic realists believing in practical wisdom rather than theoretical clarity or ideological correctness. They have come to see that human truths are relative and paradoxical, and that the politics of compromise should be the guiding principle; that human beings are flawed and fallible, made out of timber so crooked that nothing entirely straight can be built. They are not very confident that history is ever in progress or that there is an iron law governing historical development. If the existing system is not working very well or in keeping with the times, their sense of reality tells them that it can only be changed in a gentle manner, just in case grave side effects should arise. Reformers rather than revolutionaries, they prefer mundane piecemeal readjustments and local corrections to inspired programs for demolitions and recon-

structions. If a radical doctrinaire would laugh at the 'minced steps of an old lady with bound feet', a gradualist reformer does not feel ashamed of his belief that reforms of the practical and successful kind are long and well-sustained step-by-step processes. The effect of each step is closely watched, so that the success or failure of the first gives a hint of the second. A Chinese saying sums up this empiricist position very well: 'Wade across the river by feeling out for stones' – take one step and look around before taking another.

No longer easily aroused by the idea of 'paradise now', they tend to have serious doubts about all the grand narratives, whether of the 19th century or post-modern. This does not mean that they are satisfied by the status quo in China. Instead, they have a sense of urgency in the face of numerous social problems and would never decry righteous indignation. Taught by the bitter experiences of other countries, they understand that long-growing problems or evils of a country such as China are a tangled business, asking for a good deal more than drunken denunciations and demagoguery in order to be got rid of. In their social practice they have been accustomed to pluralism in the sense that they have found that incoherent and apparently incompatible values can actually coexist, though not always peacefully.

In the United States and European countries, large-scale programs of public works, social insurance and farm subsidies were carried out within the framework of predominantly private economies. It is misleading to believe that stark and fundamentalist choices have to be made between pure capitalism and pure socialism. Addiction to abstract theory has been outgrown and there is an insistence that individual problems should be individually solved, and that solid studies of concrete issues are more valuable than empty talk of 'isms'. The creation of a Chinese version of the American FDA that can establish standards for foods and drugs and test their safety would be perhaps more useful than hasty importations of social and political theories developed in countries which have totally different historical and cultural contexts.

What are the issues that need to be tackled at the present time in China? They are legion: the pervasive disregard for the rule of law, the deplorable implementation of justice, the need for protection of labor rights, the increasing disparity between rich and poor, between coastal areas and inland provinces, and unprecedented environmental pollution, the lack of a national health service and of a financial system compatible with the speed of globalization. To meet these challenges, the gradual establishment and consolidation of public institutions is of vital importance.

It is often said that the economic boom in China has not been accompanied by a democratization of politics. This complaint perhaps carries a grain of truth. But it could also be argued that critics of China are slow to perceive that the boom is the direct result of a political arrangement suitable for China's needs. The kind of extensive social reforms underway have far-reaching economic and political implications. On the other hand, Friedrich von Hayek, Karl Popper, Michael Oakeshott, John Rawls and Samuel Huntington (especially his emphasis on degree of government) from the Anglo-Saxon world as well as all the French post-modernist pundits are read and publicly discussed. In a nutshell, Chinese political scientists see the world and themselves differently as their 'structure of reference' (to borrow Edward Said's phrase) has changed. An acquaintance with Tocqueville's critique and analysis of the

French Revolution, for example, will ineluctably put one's understanding of modern Chinese radicalism in a new perspective.

Liberty is generally perceived as associated with peace, order and the rule of law. Burke's warning against the disruption of social life is very apt: 'If circumspection and caution are a part of wisdom, when we work only upon inanimate matter, surely these become a part of duty too, when the subject of our demolition and construction is not brick and timber, but sentient beings, by the sudden alteration of whose state, condition, and habit, multitudes may be rendered miserable.' The qualification of a good legislator, according to Burke, is a feeling heart and a doubting confidence. 'He ought to love and respect his kind, and to fear himself . . . Political arrangement, as it is a work for social ends, is to be only wrought by social means . . . Our patience will achieve more than our force' (Burke, 1969: 281). Warm responses to these words in the current socio-political environment tell of a humane and politically more mature China, a China that is ready to decry any policy that might subject ordinary Chinese to all the hazards of grand social experiments.

Prioritizing the social order, more and more Chinese are now participating in discussions and debates about a wide range of public issues in the mass media. Articulate indignations at the helplessness of the underprivileged, demands for checks and balances, and for more transparency in the decision-making process, are heard from time to time. Far more political than their forefathers in a modern and Western sense, the Chinese are ushering in a public realm and an open society through their own independent efforts. Meanwhile the politically initiated are carefully learning the business of using language properly and have become very sensitive to discourses of representation and interpretation, to hidden interests couched in a deceptive vocabulary, to ideologically convenient (ab)uses of blanket terms at the expense of not easily digestible facts.

Within the span of 30 years, almost one third of the Chinese population has been lifted out of extreme poverty and a huge project of urbanization is going on. The greatest achievement is perhaps the fact that, despite unsparing criticisms of bureaucratic corruption and local hands-off policies towards the poor and needy, an overwhelming majority of Chinese support the current political system and this is the only reason why the system has defied predictions of its collapse for several decades.

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Note

1. This corresponds with '*Vox populi, vox dei*'.

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