

Introduction

The Death and Resurrection of Confucianism

KENNETH J. HAMMOND AND JEFFREY L. RICHEY

In 2006, Yu Dan 于丹, a professor in Beijing Normal University's Department of Cinema, Television, and Media, published what became a runaway best-seller in China, *Yu Dan Lunyu xinde* 于丹《论语》心得 (*Yu Dan's Insights into the [Confucian] Analects*), which transcribed the contents of her very popular television lecture series on China Central Television.¹ In 2007, the Wang 王 brothers' 265-day quest to carry—on foot, in a custom-built carriage that they dubbed *Gan'en* 感恩 (“Thanksgiving”)—their aged mother to famous sites all over China riveted Chinese media audiences.² In 2008, the publication of a volume titled *Rujia shehui yu daotong fuxing* 儒家社会与道统复兴 (*Confucian Society and the Revival of the Orthodox Way*), which called for a revitalization of Chinese society and politics through an embrace of Confucianism, met not with jeers or indifference, but rather attracted serious engagement and even praise by political thinkers and public intellectuals in China.³ In 2009, the traditional springtime rite of tomb-sweeping (*Qingming* 清明) at Confucius's grave in Qufu 曲阜 was enhanced by the revival of animal sacrifices to Confucius by his descendants, more than a thousand of whom gathered later that year to celebrate their ancestor's birthday by sacrificing three large animals on the altar before his image.⁴ Finally, in early 2011, a thirty-one-foot bronze statue of Confucius weighing seventeen tons mysteriously and suddenly appeared in Beijing's Tian'anmen 天安门 Square, only to be removed under the cover of darkness some four months later.⁵

Why did a professor's commentary on the teachings of Confucius sell upward of 10 million copies (in both official and pirated editions) in less than a year? Why did two middle-aged men willingly endure the hardship of carrying their elderly mother more than 4,500 kilometers (about 2,796 miles) on foot? Why does animal sacrifice to a long-dead Chinese sage play any role whatsoever in contemporary life? Why would the Chinese government erect a gigantic icon of the ancient thinker whom Mao Zedong 毛泽东 once condemned as "a feudal mummy" just across from a fifteen-by-twenty-foot oil painting of Mao himself—and in China's largest public space, to boot? And why is all of this happening now, in the early twenty-first century, when Confucianism long ago was pronounced dead by China's Communist regime, not to mention a half-century of progressive-minded reformers who preceded Mao's Communist revolution in 1949? The answers to these questions lie in the story of Confucianism's revival in contemporary China, which this volume seeks to tell as well as to understand.

For more than two thousand years, a set of ideas, institutions, and practices commonly known as Confucianism formed the basis for Chinese intellectual and religious culture and for many aspects of Chinese and East Asian culture more broadly. Rooted in the texts and teachings associated with a figure (ca. 551–479 BCE) known as Kong Qiu 孔丘 to his contemporaries, Kongzi 孔子 ("Master Kong") to his students, and Kong Fuzi 孔夫子 (Westernized as "Confucius") to millions thereafter, what we now call "Confucianism" began as a loose set of master-disciple networks in a China divided by civil war between the collapse of the Western Zhou 周 dynasty in 771 BCE and the brutal unification accomplished by the Qin 秦 dynasty in 221 BCE. During this time, Confucianism and Confucians enjoyed no special privilege and appear to have been regarded as minor, even countercultural figures by most Chinese elites.⁶

Confucianism's fortunes changed dramatically when the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) adopted Confucian thought as a tool for legitimizing its power and controlling its subjects. In 136 BCE, the Han government established Confucian texts as the basis of its civil service examinations, making Confucian thought a mandatory subject for all who wished to obtain official employment. During this period, Confucian thought took on many recognizably religious aspects, including the ritual worship of Kongzi in state-sponsored temples.⁷ Once Confucianism acquired government support, its teachings, texts, and traditions formed the basis not only of court ritual, bureaucratic procedure, and administrative ethos, but gradually

of community and family life as well. Over time, Confucianism both absorbed and countered influences from other traditions, especially Buddhism, and became well established as the dominant worldview of Chinese elites. While elites propagated what Robert W. Foster, in Chapter 1 of this volume, calls “ruler’s Confucianism” (the use of Confucianism to promote social stability, obedience, and faith in authority), the permeation of Chinese culture by Confucian values also made possible what Foster calls “popular Confucianism” (the use of Confucianism to promote checks on rulers, such as the necessity of moral government, accountability to Heaven, and the right to revolt against unjust authorities). Thus, at both elite and popular levels, Confucian ideas formed an ongoing dynamic field of discourse that came to encompass most areas of knowledge and behavior and that continued to be developed and adapted by thinkers and activists as the social and economic conditions of Chinese life themselves changed over long spans of historical time.⁸

As the imperial era in Chinese history approached its end in the late nineteenth century, Confucianism began to be subjected to new kinds of critique, not simply in an effort to revise and adapt it to further changing circumstances, but to an increasing extent as a repudiation of both its form and content and what was more and more seen as its negative role in contemporary life. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Confucianism was subjected to thoroughgoing rejection by many young Chinese across the range of political perspectives. From the antimonarchist revolutions of the first decade through the rise of liberal Nationalism and then the emergence of Marxist radicalism, Confucian ideas, institutions, and practices were seen as retarding China’s modernization and as fundamentally unsuited to the needs of a progressive, forward-looking nation. Educated, politically engaged people in China turned to a variety of alternatives to seek a path of wealth and power for their country.

By the middle of the century, the Chinese Communist Party (*Zhongguo Gongchandang* 中国共产党, or CCP), espousing the theory of Marxist dialectical materialism and proclaiming its dedication to the construction of a socialist New China (*Xinhua* 新华), had come to power, and it set about the tasks of transforming China both in political economic terms and in the cultural sphere. Confucianism remained a target of criticism, rejected not only for its adverse practical effects, but for its putative basis as an ideology of reaction and repression.

However, the CCP was deeply divided over how best to pursue its goals of developing the New China, and the political struggles

between leadership factions generated repeated intense campaigns of popular mobilization. These culminated in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Wuchan jieji wenhua da geming* 无产阶级文化大革命) of 1966–76, by the end of which many Chinese, both urban and rural, were exhausted and frustrated, felt alienated from political engagement, and were deeply skeptical of the claims of socialist ideology, especially its moral dimensions. The early 1970s campaigns to criticize CCP-identified villains as widely separated in time as Kongzi and Lin Biao 林彪 (Mao's second-in-command until his mysterious death in 1971, after which Mao branded him a traitor) were in some ways the final exhaustion of both the fratricidal struggles of the CCP leaders and the trashing of the country's classical tradition.

With the consolidation of power by Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 by November 1978, China finally settled on a clear path of development, the policies of opening to the outside world, and the use of market mechanisms to advance economic growth. The 1980s became an era of rapid change, with many positive economic effects, but also with the spread of corruption and abuse of power. The values of socialist morality were further compromised, yet there was no clear alternative to replace them. The upheavals of 1989—before, during, and after the government-repressed protests in Tian'anmen Square—further eroded lingering faith in the established order, and a cynical materialism seemed increasingly pervasive.

Yet already some people in China were beginning to look back into the country's traditional culture to seek bases for moral values and for ways of understanding the world around them. By the 1990s, this process of searching for foundations for values and “new” ways to ground moral action was becoming much more widespread. Buddhism, Daoism, and other forms of traditional spirituality experienced popular revivals. Many young people turned to Western thought and religion, from Christianity to postmodernism.⁹

Within this turbulent and dynamic ferment, it is not surprising to note that the ideas and values of Confucianism also have been rediscovered. Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, ideas, images, behaviors, and attitudes associated with Confucianism have been discussed and sometimes acted on by a wide range of groups and individuals. Especially in the earlier stages of this process, much of the activity was either academic in nature or sponsored by government agencies, and dominated by men. But as time has gone by, the Confucian revival has become a much more broadly based phenomenon, and

the variety of agents involved has gotten increasingly diverse, both in terms of social position and in the particular views or interpretations of Confucian thought being presented.¹⁰ Women, non-academics, and nongovernmental organizations have become some of the most prominent spokespeople for the revived Confucianism expressed in popular best-sellers and other media, as well as major contributors to the revision, reimagining, and revival of Confucianism.

Now, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is possible to look at the contemporary Confucian revival in China as a complex and multivalent field of cultural production. Confucian revivalists are both transmitting ancient traditions (and thus maintaining continuity with their cultural past) and innovating new interpretations of them (and thus creating new meanings that keep these traditions relevant in an ever-changing, uncertain modern China). This volume examines aspects of this process, primarily within the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also in the context of the larger East Asian region. Unlike previous studies, it expands the critical focus on contemporary Confucian revival in China beyond the fields of ethics and politics and addresses the revival's relationship to China's long history and the abundant historical precedents for such a revival. Its chapters are divided into three sections: (1) Confucianism and the State, (2) Confucianism and Intellectual Life, and (3) Confucianism and Popular Culture.

Part I begins with Robert W. Foster's comparative analysis of the role played by Confucianism in Meiji 明治 (1868–1912) Japan and post-Mao (1976–present) China. Each is a case of a modernizing East Asian state attempting to balance rapid economic development with the maintenance of political control. During these periods, both Japanese and Chinese turned to Confucianism to define a distinctive identity based on “civilization” (*J. bunmei, C. wenming* 文明) as a way to promote national unity in the face of social change, with rulers using Confucianism to build support and critics using Confucianism to voice dissent. Jennifer Oldstone-Moore's chapter builds on Foster's analysis by documenting how Confucianism has been promoted as a universally valid, if culturally specific vehicle for modernization in progress in Lee Kuan Yew 李光耀's Singapore, Taiwan 台灣, and the PRC by being presented in terms of scientific rationality (as opposed to religious superstition, a label that earlier modernizing opponents of Confucianism attempted to foist upon the tradition). The striking contrasts between the regimes that have appealed to Confucianism for legitimacy—imperial Japan, Nationalist China, postcolonial Singapore,

and the CCP—not to mention the diverse uses of Confucianism to mobilize opposition to such regimes, point to its persistent flexibility and appeal as an East Asian ideology.

Part II concentrates on the intellectual dimensions of the Confucian revival in contemporary China. Anthony A. DeBlasi discusses the marketing of Confucian values beyond official (i.e., academic and governmental) circles in China. His chapter examines how Confucianism is presented in works aimed at a popular readership, which in turn reveals much about the appetites and interests of China's emerging literate public, to say nothing of the complex interactions now under way between academic discourse, state power, popular culture, and the market economy. Kenneth J. Hammond's chapter focuses on the ongoing conversation between "New Leftism" (*Xin Zuopai* 新左派, the ideological critique of capitalistic reforms and advocacy of Mao-era socialism inaugurated in the 1990s) and what he calls "Left Confucianism": a movement based not on Marxist thought, but on Confucian values, whose exponents nonetheless are (like "New Leftists") equally concerned with the social and human costs of China's rapid modernization and economic development. Finally, Jeffrey L. Richey discusses how Internet discourse in the PRC reveals the resurgent power of Confucianism as a conceptual resource for articulating in-group morality, critique of youth culture, and the value of native norms vis-à-vis Westernization. All three chapters in this section explicate different ways in which Confucianism is being deployed to articulate a revitalized humanism that is rooted deeply in the Chinese past, but that can restrain the centrifugal social forces unleashed by the market economy of today.

Part III turns to the fascinating and myriad ways in which Confucianism increasingly plays roles in Chinese popular culture. While Confucianism was a prominent target of the first two of China's massive youth movements during the twentieth century—the "May 4th Movement" (*Wusi Yundong* 五四运动) of 1919, which protested consequences of the Versailles Treaty that favored Allied powers, including Japan, at China's expense, and the aforementioned Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—the third great youth movement has drawn strength from Confucian traditions. This is the subject of Robert L. Moore's chapter, which investigates the relationship between Confucian values and China's "millennial" youth (the post-Mao generation born after 1980, or *baling hou* 八零后). His anthropological fieldwork reveals that most young Chinese today view the values of harmony (*he* 和), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), and respect

(*jing* 敬) for tradition and education as paramount and as constituting the culture to which they feel they belong—or, in other words, that most young Chinese today articulate their sense of cultural identity in terms of Confucian values. Julia K. Murray concludes the volume by chronicling the proliferation of images of Kongzi in contemporary China fewer than forty years after such images were ritually desecrated and destroyed by zealous youth during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Through a broad range of media ranging from monumental public statues to feature films, paintings, and animated cartoons, the image of Kongzi and thus the tradition for which he stands is taking on meanings and performing functions that would have been unimaginable in China at any prior moment in the past century.

In the early twentieth century, the Chinese author Lu Xun 鲁迅 likened the social impact of China's Confucian traditions to cannibalism, arguing that it led to the destruction of the nation's social health and cultural vitality.¹¹ Many other Chinese intellectuals followed Lu's lead, so much so that China could be described as having adopted a strict anti-Confucian cultural diet for most of the next hundred years. Now it seems that China is reviving its ancestral cultural recipes. At the same time, China is tinkering with old ingredients and cooking methods; this is not "your father's" Confucianism, but rather one adapted to modern tastes and dietary concerns. No one knows precisely what the future holds for Confucian traditions or Chinese society. At the banquet of Chinese culture, however, one may be certain that Confucian dishes will continue to be served, even if they are distributed across a variety of courses. Whatever the future of China may be, it—like China's past—will continue to be intertwined with the fate of Confucianism.

Notes

1. See Sheila Melvin, "Modern Gloss on China's Golden Age," *New York Times*, September 3, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/03/arts/03stud.html>, and Chapters 3 (Anthony A. DeBlasi, "Selling Confucius: The Negotiated Return of Tradition in Post-Socialist China"), 4 (Kenneth J. Hammond, "Left Confucianism and the New Left in Early 21st Century China") in this volume.

2. See "Fueled by Filial Piety," *China Daily*, March 10, 2010, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-03/10/content_19573827.htm, and Chapter 5 (Jeffrey L. Richey, "Jackie Chan as Confucian Critic: Contemporary Popular Confucianism in China") in this volume.

3. See Chapter 4 (Kenneth J. Hammond, “Left Confucianism and the New Left in Early 21st Century China”) in this volume.

4. See “Descendants Attend Memorial Ceremony for Confucius in Qufu,” *China Economic Net*, March 31, 2008, http://en.ce.cn/National/pic-news/200803/31/t20080331_15010653_4.shtml, and Chapter 8 (Julia K. Murray, “The Sage’s New Clothes: Popular Images of Confucius in Contemporary China”) in this volume.

5. See Andrew Jacobs, “Confucius Statue Vanishes near Tiananmen Square,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/23/world/asia/23confucius.html>.

6. Valuable studies of Confucianism’s early development include Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) and Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). David S. Nivison provides a useful account of early Confucianism’s wider cultural and intellectual context in “The Classical Philosophical Writings,” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 745–812.

7. On Confucianism’s transformation during the Hàn and subsequent dynastic periods, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, “Confucius and the *Analects* in the Hàn,” in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 134–162, and *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*, ed. Thomas A. Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).

8. On the development of Confucianism in later imperial China, see Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1957); *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Thomas A. Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); and Rodney L. Taylor, “The Religious Character of the Confucian Tradition,” *Philosophy East and West* 48, no. 1 (January 1998): 80–107.

9. For a sense of the diversity and breadth of contemporary Chinese religious revivals, see Ian Johnson, “The Rise of the Tao,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2010; Jinghao Zhou, “Religious Practices—Contemporary,” in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of China* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2009), IV: 1880–1885; and Jiexia Elisa Zhai, “Contrasting Trends of Religious Markets in Contemporary Mainland China and in Taiwan,” *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 1 (2010): 94–111.

10. See Joseph P. L. Jiang, ed., *Confucianism and Modernization: A Symposium* (Taipei: Freedom Council, 1987); Hung-chao Tai, ed., *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* (Washington, DC: The

Washington Institute Press, 1989); Wei-ming Tu et al, eds., *The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Discussion of Confucian Humanism in East Asia* (Honolulu: The East-West Center, 1992); Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism/Xiandai xin rujia: The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei: Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies, 2001); Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and John Makeham, *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

11. See "A Madman's Diary," trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 7–15.